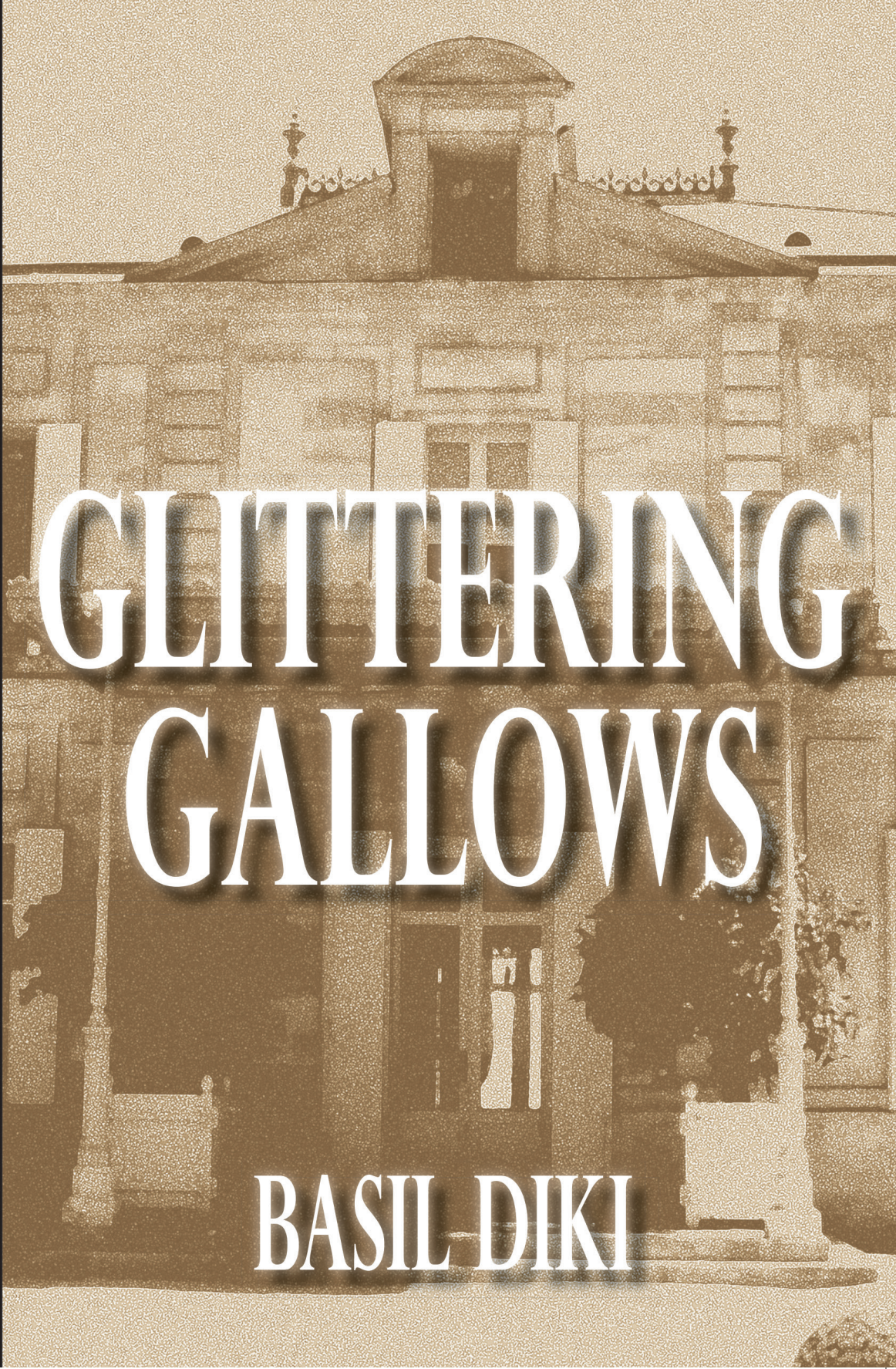




GLITTERING GALLOWS

BASIL DIKI

VISIT...

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Glittering Gallows

Basil Diki



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Dedication

*For Bev, Shannon and Wilkie;
So that they, their children and grandchildren
Keep their eyes open, spirits closed and say 'danki'.*

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Prologue

“Your life is about to change, sweetheart.”

“Are you trying to be coy, Regis?”

“Today I’ll take you to my uncle, the premier.”

“Stop kidding me.”

He shook his head. “I must keep my word and take the affair to the next level.”

“Which is?”

“You’re Pedi, Agnes; you know I must introduce you to Uncle Moagi.”

It was Saturday. They were lunching on what a menu termed *Grigliata Mista di Carne*, mixed grill with chicken pieces, beef sausages, short ribs and minute steak. The venue was an Italian restaurant in a shopping mall on the eastern outskirts of Central Pretoria.

Minutes later they emerged holding hands, a gorgeous woman barely twenty-one years old and a handsome man two and a half years her senior. He waved at a taxi and dramatically opened the door for her, smiling and bowing.

She climbed into the backseat, her eyes teary and on him, not believing that indeed he was taking her to the residence of the premier of Gauteng Province. If all went well within the hour, she would be introduced to the politician and self-made billionaire, the man who held the governorship reins in Pretoria, Johannesburg and beyond.

“Where to, boss?”

“Randlord Mansion—the residence of the premier, please,” he answered the taxi driver.

“You want me to take you to Bryntirion, sir?”

Bryntirion was a decorous ministerial suburb on the eastern grounds of the Union Buildings, the country’s national governmental offices. The State President, the premier of Gauteng, the Provincial Administrator, among other top echelon leaders, had their official residents in the idyllic area.

Regis shook his head and smiled. "The premier lives at his private residence in Wonderboom."

The taxi left the kerb and took the direction of the city centre.

"You should've told me yesterday, Reggie. Do I meet your uncle like this?" She pointed at her skirt. The hem of the garment was about mid-thigh, and because her wide hips and bulbous fundament were typically African, scandalous.

"Agee, I've seen you in shorter skirts and shorts than this." He held her hand in his and squeezed it. "You don't have to be pretentious, do you?"

"Doesn't the skirt categorise me as a whore? Be honest, Regis."

"Are *you* a whore, my darling?"

"Does Hon. Makgunda know we're coming?"

"Yes and no, babe."

"What do you mean?"

"*Yes*—because I called him yesterday and told him I wanted to see him this afternoon. *No*—because he has no idea I coming with you." He pulled her and kissed her on the lips, a light dash.

"Perhaps you should've hinted him."

"What for, Agee? You worry about petty things."

"Do you want to surprise him?"

"He's too rich and powerful to be surprised by anything. He sits in the Presidential Council."

"Does he know about me?"

"I once told him about you some five or so months ago. Maybe he'll remember."

"What's going to happen after the visit?"

"He'll find time and inform my father in person. If my father is agreeable he'll ask to meet you too for appreciation and one or two questions to verify we aren't related. Incest is taboo in Pedi."

She giggled. "We resemble each other to some extent. Suppose he discovers we're related, will you ditch me?"

"I'll tell my father to hang himself. I'll marry you before a magistrate."

Again she laughed. "What'll happen after I meet your father?"

“My two uncles and my father will either contribute money towards the bride-price or at least lend weight to our traditional wedding ceremony by attending.”

When the taxi was turning north from Pretorius into Hamilton St, Agnes carefully wiped her eyes with tissue paper. “Regis, are you really serious about marrying me?”

“Of course, my Agnes; I’m helpless without you.”

“Where’ll we live... your parents’ house?”

“We’re Catholics. By faith Moses marched the Israelites towards the Red Sea. I’ll find a job as a paramedic or a Non-Destructive Testing technician. There’re many hospitals and engineering firms in Gauteng.”

“But that doesn’t say where we’ll live.”

“Trust me, babe. I can talk the premier into giving me money to buy a decent cottage or rent a flat until we’re able to stand on our feet. He can prop us effortlessly for some time. Everything will be fine, trust me. What’re billionaires for?”

Soon after passing Soutpansberg Rd, they crossed the northern limits of Central Pretoria into the four-hundred-and-fifty-hectare municipal nature reserve. Birds and small species of antelope abounded in swarms and clusters respectively. Agnes put an arm around his shoulders and kissed him. When they left the reserve and drove past a small historical fort built after the botched 1896 Starr Jameson raid, the houses became sparse and imposing.

They entered Wonderboom, a posh farming-cum-residential suburb. Cattle, sheep and horses graced in paddocks on some of the premises. The premier’s property was a farm on the edge of the neighbourhood on the way to Sinoville Airport.

At the premier’s panelled gate a policeman armed with an assault rifle; one of two men manning the gate, stopped the taxi. The columned gargantuan portal in polished black granite, marble and yellow sandstone, as pompous as the Cecil John Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town, was an overt introduction to the grandiose within the property.

“I’m Regis Makgunda,” he explained. “Why is the security here changed so frequently?”

“Please, disembark. We’ll search the vehicle.” He searched them with a portable scanner, looked in the glove compartment and under the front seats of the taxi before signalling to a security camera.

The gate slid open automatically. The asphalt driveway to the mansion was stone-cobbled on the shoulders, long, jacaranda-flanked and meandering. Between the trees stood abstract human-size marble statues, large terracotta amphora and vases.

“How do I behave in your uncle’s presence? What do I say to him?”

“Just be yourself. Keep your knees together every time.”

“Don’t speak like my mother, Reggie. What’s that?” She asked, pointing to their left at a windowless building of corrugated sheets the size of a gigantic warehouse.

“That’s the hangar for his Boeing 747. Behind it is a garage for his limousines. The staff quarters are also behind the hangar. Further down, away from the noise of the jet, are the stables. You can’t see them from here.”

They took a final curve and the mansion, double-storey and striking in yellow sandstone, loomed, echoing an intricate version of the monumental gate. Surrounded by geranium-dominated flower gardens, it overlooked an oval Olympian swimming pool. The mansion appeared like a flattened version of the Cape Royale Luxury Hotel, in Green Point, Cape Town or, from another angle, St Petersburg’s Yusupovs Moika Palace along the Moika River. Three bronze gargoyles spat jets of water into a fountain, producing an ethereal, uncoordinated aquatic orchestra.

Guinea fowls, turkeys and peacocks roamed a roundabout around the fountain in front of the house entrance. When they circled the roundabout for parking, Agnes gaped at the elaborate Italianate ornamentation in the façade, so did the taxi driver. Going by the columned and fluted portico, tiled eaves and the cornices, the mansion was Italian. But from its lines and symmetry an expert could tell it was British.

Regis paid the driver and dismissed the taxi. A butler, a dwarf in a dovetailed tuxedo, came to meet them. The man was in his mid-

forties. Agnes cringed on seeing him, but quickly regained composure.

“Hi, Regis,” the butler said civilly, nodding. “Hon. Makgunda is expecting you in the main lounge upstairs. Follow me, please.”

Discounting the main entrance of engraved oaken double doors, most of the windows on the ground floor were behind heavily louvered shutters. They followed the butler into the house, Agnes reduced to a kid at Disneyland. The trio ascended a staircase.

The premier met them in an upper hallway, a snow-white French poodle, Hicks, in his arms. The dog’s fibres were long and silken, like the wool of an Australian merino. Its fur was manicured and clipped in decorative tufts on the mane and knee joints. Affectionately squeezing and pampering the priced dog, the man was angelic in a white suit. The butler bowed towards his master.

“Welcome,” the politician said, extending a hand. “It’s good to see you again after a long while.”

“Uncle, meet Agnes Lamola, my girlfriend. Agee, meet Hon. Moagi Makgunda, my uncle.”

He shook Agnes’ hand and held it for a moment, a trifle taken aback. “*Lamola*,” he said reflectively. “That’s unmistakably Pedi.”

“I’m Pedi, sir, from Limpopo Province. Our rural home is near Louis Trichardt. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.” Agnes was nervous; her voice betrayed her.

“The pleasure is entirely mine, if you don’t mind the cliché, Agnes.” He turned to Regis. “She’s very pretty. What brings you to Wonderboom, Regis?” The premier’s attitude was business-like.

“Won’t you let us sit down, Uncle?” Regis asked, smiling in a bid to invite a cordial atmosphere.

“Of course, come right in and sit down. This doesn’t look like an ordinary courtesy call.”

Regis and Agnes held hands and walked behind the premier, the butler bringing the rear.

“Where’s aunt?” Regis asked as they ascended a staircase.

“She’s visiting her people in Limpopo. She flew with the children yesterday. I’m expecting them on Monday afternoon.”

“Aren’t the children attending school on Monday?”

“Monday and Tuesday are public holidays, my boy. You wanted my wife and the children to be here?”

“Not necessarily. I was just wondering.”

“If I wasn’t a guest of honour at a municipal conference this morning I would’ve flown with them.”

They followed a flower-decorated passage and entered a lounge. The room, spacious and immaculately furnished, had three entrances. The premier gestured them to seat in a couch. He sat down facing them, his posture humble; the dog in his lap. The poodle calmly stared at the visitors and waved its bushy tail.

“What refreshments can I bring you?” the butler asked the visitors.

“I can do with a beer,” Regis said quickly.

“You can give me a chocolate drink.”

The butler bowed and exited.

“What do you think of the house, Agee?” Regis asked.

“It’s royal. I don’t have the words to describe it.”

“A British merchant lived here for many decades,” the premier chipped in. “The house was originally Cape-Dutch. I bought the property ten years ago. I extended and renovated the house.”

“It must be worth millions. It pales into insignificance the *Palace of Justice* and many historic buildings.”

“Oh, you really think so, Agnes? I thought it was barn-big but modest. Thank you. What brings you to Wonderboom, Reggie?”

“Custom brings me here, Uncle. I proposed to Agnes. She said *yes*.”

Moagi Makgunda stared at him dumbfounded. “You’re jobless, Regis.”

“I discussed it with her. I won’t be jobless forever, Uncle.”

He clapped his hands, lightly, theatrically. “That’s a good attitude towards life. Every person must hope for a better future. You impress me with your determination.”

“Are you agreeable, Uncle?”

“Nowadays most guys your age are gay and drink themselves stupid. Your father will be proud of you when he learns of your

plans. I'm happy for you, Regis. The family has suffered a spate of deaths over the years. I see the Makgunda lineage ramifying."

"Thank you, Uncle."

"I'll pay the bride-price the Lamolas will demand. I'll foot the wedding bill and buy you a Jaguar XKR-S or the latest Lexus and a house in the city, but on one condition."

"Must it be conditional, Uncle?"

"You must've a white wedding. God bless the two of you."

"No, God bless *you*, Uncle."

"If you don't want your friends to see you living in a good house, but loafing at the same time, you can live in my dacha in Krasnoyarsk."

Agnes was bewildered and chipped in despite herself. "What's a dacha and where's Krasnoyarsk?"

The premier grinned. "Russians call a private holiday bungalow a dacha. Krasnoyarsk is a town in the eastern part of the Russian Federation."

Regis kissed his sweetheart. Everything was beyond their expectation.

"Recently I bought a yacht from a manufacturer in Volgograd," the billionaire continued. "The vessel is under test cruise in the Caspian Sea as we speak. Oddly the Russians named *her* after Gregory Rasputin. I'll give it a Pedi name on landing in Cape Town. You can sail on it on your return leg from the dacha if you're game to visiting Siberian Russia. My shipping agent has already mapped the route."

The couple exchanged excited glances.

"Of course we would like to travel and see the world, Uncle."

"From the Caspian Sea, you'll sail on the Volga from Astrakhan to Volgograd. Still on the Volga River, you'll sail southeast to the Sea of Azov and into the Black Sea. You'll reach the Mediterranean via the Aegean Sea after stopping in Athens for sight-seeing. Greece is a different world wedged in ours. You'll see what I mean when you dock at Athens."

"Is this for real, Uncle? I think I'm dreaming."

"It's safe to avoid the shorter and tempting route that would take you to Somali pirates," the politician went on as if his nephew hadn't

expressed doubt. He began stroking the dog. “The longer route, which is my preference, will see you leave the Mediterranean between Morocco and Spain. Replenish your stocks in Gibraltar before you sail onto the North Atlantic and trace the African coastline. You can stop as cultural tourists and souvenir collectors at many ports from Dakar to Walvis Bay. Then you can dock anywhere along Table Bay from Rocklands to Duncan Dock. Those are at least three months of sight-seeing, bar-flying and romance. What do you say, Regis?”

“I can’t sail a yacht, Uncle.”

Moagi laughed. “A Russian crew will take care of that. Our agreement says the shipbuilder’s crew will train my men to cruise and manage the vessel.”

Regis left the couch and sank on his knees before his uncle. For the next five minutes he thanked his uncle in poetic cadences, vaguely confessing that for many years he had had a low opinion of the premier and thought him blind to the misery of the rest of his siblings and their children.

Tacit and expressionless, Moagi Makgunda looked down at him before he interrupted him. “I’m sure Agee would like a tour of the house. Take her around quickly; I’ve a surprise for the both of you.”

Playing tour guide to his sweetheart and beside himself with excitement, he took Agnes through passages and up and down staircases, at times carrying her in his arms and often kissing her at the slightest opportunity. She clung to him like a limpet, the magnificence of the house and its furnishings enchanting her, his mood charming her insane.

He had never seen her so moved and happy. When they trudged to the lounge thirty minutes later, the butler was waiting for them with a tray bearing a chocolate cocktail, a beer and an inverted glass. The premier and the dog weren’t in the room.

“Where’s he?” Regis almost demanded. “Don’t tell us he had to leave for an urgent meeting.”

“Hon. Makgunda’ll meet you in the northern portico,” the butler said, presenting them their beverages. “He’d appreciate if I took you there immediately.” He put the empty tray on a side table. “Please

rise and kindly follow me. No one wants to keep the Honourable waiting.”

Nursing their drinks, they followed the butler down another staircase and through a devious passage until they emerged outside the house.

“Surprise!” Moagi Makgunda rose from a cane chair and shouted upon their emergence. “Surprise!” he shouted again, laughed and clapped his hands.

Regis and Agnes looked about, frozen. Silver food warmers with burners underneath them stood on two tables in the portico. A third table held veiled cakes and varieties of liquor from white wines to champagne, spirits to vodka. Three charcoal grills smouldered outside the portico. Two maids in pink uniforms and frilled, white aprons were putting finishing touches to the arrangement. A third maid wheeled to the grills a trolley with dressed chicken.

“What’s the occasion, Uncle?”

“Your intentions are worth celebrating on the spur of the moment. I thought I shouldn’t just mouth my happiness. I want you and Agnes to see it.” He gestured at the laid tables.

“Uncle, you’re throwing us a party?”

“It’s half a party, half a binge, but wholly yours, the two of you. My staff will help us celebrate. Sit down, please.”

While Agnes went to sit in a nearby chair, Regis gulped the beer in his glass and hastily put it on a table. Coming from a rich relative, he saw the party as a just and generous gesture after years of mistrust and tribulation. “Somebody, give me a bottle of vodka, please!”

The butler gave him one immediately. Half an hour later a popular radio DJ arrived and the party went full throttle as maids, gardeners and security personnel made merry and freely rubbed shoulders with their employer and his guests.

Regis took frugally diluted tots of Russian vodka. The more he drank and danced with Agnes, the more beautiful and placid she became in his eyes. She thawed to the premier and his staff and smiled with unadulterated mirth. When she waltzed with his uncle, Regis couldn’t help noticing her gracious movements and mortifying

loveliness. He continued to drown himself in vodka but suddenly slid into a drunken stupor and blacked out.

When Regis Makgunda woke up, his body hurt in many places. He was drowsy and confused. Snippets of the party flashed in his head.

Where am I? Where's Aggie?

On raising his head, he saw that he was lying in something ceramic and cold, which turned out to be a bathtub. He was bloodied. It was daytime. The curtains and the walls told him he was in Randlord Mansion. He was very hungry and exhausted.

A wall clock stated the time as a few minutes past four o'clock. He heard it ticking, his heart pounding. Something was in his left hand. Lifting his head, he looked at it. The hand held a pair of familiar lacy crimson panties, Agnes'. He couldn't mistake them having bought them that year as a modest Valentines present for her.

The undergarment was ripped and bloody.

Chapter 1

Erotic business was low that week at the Château Richelieu in the farmlands near Nancy, France, though orthodox trade in the area; minding grapevines, champagne production, its storage, auction and transportation, flourished throughout the district famous for its first-grade wines.

But when the hum of a car and the sound of its wheels crashing loose cobblestones reached the château's staff and resident prostitutes at midday, the unregistered brothel erupted into preparatory activity. Years of renovations beginning in the seventeenth century hitherto had turned the building into an architectural crossbreed between an ancient château and a modern villa.

"One or a couple of ballerinas are going to be laid today," a childish voice shouted in a passage.

"What's your guess," another juvenile voice responded, "Jack the Ripper or Mick Jagger?"

Nervous giggles sounded in various rooms. *Jack the Ripper* was code for sadists; *Mick Jagger* was a cipher for any man who prioritised foreplay. The latter often fell in love with the girls. But the establishment considered affairs with clients acts of misconduct. Those who dared and were discovered lost their accrued commission and salaries. In the worst cases they were expelled without any benefits. Rumour had it that they were killed and their bodies placed in acid baths in the basement, or were fed into an incinerator on the premises.

The girls popped their heads in the corridors to wink and wave at each other. Hardly seventeen years old and having tasted money and men at a tender age, the girls were morally decadent through and through. But the establishment had groomed them into first-class entertainers. In the throes of their work everything about them from smiles to purrs was pretentious.

The anxious girls frolicked in lingerie, others in bikinis, a few completely naked. Those with apartments overlooking the eastern side vanished into them to look out the windows. Girls whose apartments faced away from the driveway in the west ran down corridors to the lounge and bar. Despite their excitement, the arrival of a client always brought an admixture of happiness, anxiety and dread.

The sensations stemmed from a one out of twelve probability the client would select one of the girls. A visitor translated to an accrual of commission on the selected girl. If entertained to their satisfaction, most of the men tipped the girls handsomely. It wasn't unusual for some girls to receive a thousand euro in tips. The dread came from the fear of falling into the hands of extreme, sadistic perverts—the Rippers.

Heidi Gaynor stood naked at her window on the château's ground floor. Through gaps in the mulberry and orange groves surrounding the building, she caught glimpses of the approaching car as it drove slowly uphill on a meandering cobbled driveway leading to the château. Although trees, shrubbery and flowers obstructed the vehicle now and then, she deduced from the car's imposing glistering grill, headlights and bumper that it was grandiose.

Though the car wasn't in the league of many expensive cars she had seen at the château, it was remotely familiar. From her mind's recesses, she figured it was the vintage Rolls-Royce Phantom Catherine Middleton and her father rode in from the Goring Hotel to the Abbey on the occasion of her marriage to Prince William. Was Sir Michael Middleton, the princess' father, coming to seek erotic services?

As the car approached, she reached for a bikini suit on a walnut chest of drawers by the window and quickly put it on, her eyes riveted on the car, her mind racing, curiosity gaining the better of her. At such times she always wondered why elderly, rich gentlemanly men were fond of bedding girls of school-going age. The fact that wealthy men travelled thousands of kilometres and went to extremes for illicit intimacy astonished her.

Judging from the men she had entertained, the brothel drew its clientele from France itself and its neighbouring countries; Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Some flew from Britain and America. All the clients were overtly rich. During her eight-month stay so far, Heidi had amused businessmen, celebrities and aristocratic members of many royal families from all over Europe and Africa.

“It’s the royal Norwegian undertaker!” a girl shouted out a window.

Repressed giggles erupted.

“No!” another voice yelled, “It’s a Roman Cardinal here to beatify our dead vineyards.”

“Keep God out of this dirty business,” another girl reprimanded the last speaker.

“You’re crazy,” the reprimanded girl retorted. “It’s a sin to confuse God with a Cardinal or the Pope.”

“It’s more sinful for any girl to see the nakedness of a man her father or grandfather’s age!” a different voice joined in. “What’s more sinful than holding the Easter eggs of a white-haired bastard?”

“Shut up, squirrels!” Madame Brigitte’s unmistakable voice, husky from the abuse of vodka, brandy and cigars, suddenly erupted in the passage from the lounge and bar. “Don’t let your excitement drive away clients!”

Rushing footsteps of the girls who had dashed to the lounge and bar filled the passage again. Madame Brigitte swore at the girls to remain in their rooms and shun soliciting for clients. “You aren’t loose roadside bitches in the slums of Bombay!” she howled.

A passage door banged shut.

Madame Brigitte was in her mid-fifties and officially the boarding mistress at the château masquerading as an elite ballet and classic music school. Essentially, the girls saw her running the brothel on a day-to-day basis; supervising everyone from housekeepers to the girls. In times of trouble she dressed the girls as ballerinas and fooled French authorities into believing the establishment was scholarly and important in the revival of the French Academy established in the seventeenth century by Cardinal Richelieu, the pioneering owner of

the château and a former Prime Minister of France. None of the girls knew its current owner except that it was jointly owned by a consortium of influential Italian and French businessmen.

Between 9 am and 1 pm, when most clients needed time to replenish their energies, the girls routinely took ballet lessons from a resident American choreographer in her late thirties. Her international certificates of achievements, trophies and shields were displayed in the lounge and bar. At times high-ranking government officials raided the château escorted by the French police. Madame Brigitte seemed to know in advance of every raid. The officials always found the girls going through ballet choreography to the tune of Beethoven or some other classic musicians. Clients were locked in a secret air-conditioned, comfy compartment in the cellar.

A spooky moniker confirmed it was a Rolls-Royce Phantom IV. The windows were tinted and closed. One of the girls was going to be lucky or unfortunate, depending on the tastes and temperament of the client. Heidi didn't care; she had long ceased to feel pity for herself; self-pity was a prelude to depression and suicide.

The trade demanded total resignation to the whims and craziness of the clients, a battlefield-approach was the key, especially with some clients walking in with monstrous sex toys. In the eight months she was at the château, she learnt to detach herself from the acts for the duration of the intimacy whether the man was *Mick Jagger* or *Jack the Ripper*.

She looked at her image in a full-length mirror on the wall. Her beauty and petite structure mesmerised her. Her eyes were dark, gawking and almond, her features elfin. Fingering her blonde hair flowing to her bare shoulders, she stared at her supermodel pulchritude. But self-pity dampened her; it saddened her that in the entire human enterprise a jewel of her beauty had found a niche as an illegal prostitute.

She brushed the self-admiration as biased and pitiable, a counter-thought that if she was indeed a head-turner then she wouldn't be brothel material superseded her conviction. If a beauty pageant were held among the girls the competition would be fierce and cut-throat.

The people who scouted for the girls had eyes for nothing but first-class exquisiteness coupled with a vulnerable appearance. Though a majority of the girls were European and American, two of the beauties were from Johannesburg and the other from Madagascar. One girl was from Rio de Janeiro.

Heidi returned to the window in time to see the Rolls-Royce coming to a halt in the parking space besides the foyer. It stopped near a monstrous bronze gargoyle spitting water into a fountain surrounded by Tritons and naiads. A gloved white chauffeur in a sky-blue cap, tunic and a matching pair of trousers quickly stepped out of the car and opened the rear door behind him. A polished shoe stepped outside the vehicle followed by an expensive walking cane with intricate designs. Heidi guessed the cane was ivory.

A man in a feathered black bowler and a tailored metallic grey suit alighted from the backseat. The chauffeur bowed slightly, one hand still holding the door open. From the elevated angle the hat obscured Heidi's view of his face, but she thought she saw a grey moustache. But from the way he climbed out of the car without leaning on the cane, he was neither pathetically old nor frail. The man walked tall towards the foyer, vanishing behind some trees.

Because there were chances the arrival would pick her, Heidi crossed to the closet and went through her clothes, all brothel issue. Madame Brigitte had copiously loaded their heads with hints to total erotica. For starters, sophisticated and poetic men wanted their quarry looking vulnerable and covered in layers of clothes; for them to unfurl gradually like the onion-like warping of origami until the timid jewel within was exposed. An advanced modification of the concept was to let the man sit on the bed and strip-tease him until his eyes were bloodshot.

She selected a dinner dress, long-sleeved, purple and hugging. Braless, her nipples jutted its chiffon fabric like spearheads. Matching stiletto shoes complimented her appearance. After double checking if her armpits weren't smelly, she combed her hair before the mirror. Heidi wished the man would come to her; otherwise her stay at the brothel was becoming more of a penitentiary detention than anything else.

She sat on the bed waiting, anticipatory and remotely cursing fate for the trade she found herself in. Though at times pomp and plausible romance festooned the occupation, destiny had been cruel with her. An orphan with no memory of her mother, all she knew about her infancy and parentage was that a Good Samaritan stumbled on her about seventeen years ago in a sanitary gutter somewhere in Tilbury. He took her to the police and she ended up at an Anglican orphanage a few kilometres from the London Arena in the Docklands. She believed her mother was a cheap prostitute for sailors and the harbour's menial cockneys and gangsters.

An overseer of the orphanage, Father Claude Gaynor, a cynic who waited eight years to be sure she was past the grasp of child-killer diseases and wasn't AIDS-infected as was the case with most orphans throughout Britain, adopted her and moved her to his middle-class double-storied house in Cubitt Town in the Isle of Dogs. A married father of two children, a son, Renee and a daughter, Fiona, both eight and four years Heidi's seniors, his family was stable, God-fearing and outwardly happy. His wife, Mrs Emma Gaynor, loved her like her own child and would spare time to read her psalms and help her with her homework. Her love, companionship and surrogate motherhood dissipated Heidi's abhorrence of life and God.

When she was eleven, Father Gaynor's son, Renee, nineteen years old then and a second-year college motor mechanics student, began spoiling her with chocolates and sweets, and touching her awkward parts seemingly by mistake. She warmed to his advances. Within weeks, he raped her almost every night until she was fourteen, sex-obsessed and insatiable.

When Father Gaynor realised that the two had an improper relationship, he tried in vain to talk his son into confessing and repenting; and Heidi into admitting to an incestuous relationship. Renee maintained his love was brotherly, and Heidi was '*the family's cripple*' in need of extra attention. She was obstinate nothing was sinister about their relationship, suggesting it was absurd and ungodly for anyone to think in that direction.

Unabated, the two were at it night after night and whenever possible during the day. Father Gaynor never raised his eyebrows or

the question again, at least to the two, but a fortnight after questioning them, he tiptoed upstairs to Heidi's bedroom and thought he saw *her* in bed alone, covered totally and sleeping quietly. On his way down, he passed Renee's bedroom and heard some profane groans. Trying the door handle, he found the door unlocked, entered and turned on the light. Renee and Heidi lay intertwined and naked on the bed. Gaping, the priest crossed himself as his wife entered the room in a nightgown. Mrs Gaynor screamed, covered her eyes and sank to the floor. Heidi wished a crater would open underneath her and swallow her in her nakedness.

Fearing admonition from the church, Father Gaynor privately administered unction to the two in his house. He said he was purging them of the sin of fornication, incest and lies, mortal sins. The lies came from the previous denial and the calculated dummy of clothes the two placed in Heidi's bed to fool him and Emma. For three months Heidi thought the priest had exorcised the demons that drove his son until Father Gaynor sneaked into her room at night, a banquet of roses in his hand, and forced himself on her.

It appeared the amorous demons that bothered his son multiplied and found refuge in the priest. From that night onwards, he craved her like air; devising ways to isolate and be with her whenever possible, often giving her taxi fare to come to his office at the church at the end of her school day. For a month they made love in the vestry, on the pews and on the altar, shattering Heidi's belief in God and the virtue of righteousness Mrs Gaynor planted in her.

Looking back, the priest marinated her in sin until Emma, Renee and Fiona burst into the vestry one afternoon and literally caught them pants down. Father Gaynor pleaded demonic possession and begged his family not to put his reputation and livelihood on the line. The three turned on Heidi, nearly thrashing her into pulp, and banished her from the family house. They threw her clothes out of the house and called her a whore, daughter of perdition and witch, among other things. Since her attackers brandished a cutlass, a broom and a brick, she fled without any possession or spare clothes.

The recollection always soured her thoughts.

Presently she must focus on entertaining the arrival if he came her way. She sat on the edge of the bed, her ear attuned to the movements in the passage. Since every girl was now in her quarters and the initial excitement had vanished, in its stead standing a fusion of expectation and naivety, Heidi heard the clatter of high-heels and the cane as it landed on the floor, manly footsteps, and doors open and close one after the other. The noise grew louder. She guessed Madam Brigitte was making a customary selection tour with the visitor. Some visitors weren't content with the nude pictures they saw at the reception and elected to look at the girls individually.

Eventually a door closed and the footsteps approached hers. She stood up as her door flung open. Madam Brigitte ushered the visitor into her room. He was wiry, his body hinting at a strict adherence to an exercise regimen. The cane was ivory, expensive and adorned with African ethnic engravings of elephants, crocodiles and birds. With the tip of the artefact on his right shoe, the man stood with an assumed air of modesty, but already he was appraising her. At close range, his appearance gave her a vague unease. Heidi thought his ocean-blue eyes were deceptive.

"Rosella," Madam Brigitte said, "the gentleman seeks the company of a tender girl full of vigour and sagacity. He'd like to look at you."

Heidi felt like a commodity in a bazaar; an item whose value or lack thereof was determined from a glimpse. She smiled. "Is he going to look at me with my clothes on?"

The visitor adjusted his hat and stepped closer to her, his eyes scanning her from the head downwards. He reeked of gin and an exclusive deodorant, but appeared ready to throw up at the sight of a blemish. Heidi stood still, her bosom puffed out, a sly smile on her lips, though she thought he was going to vomit all over her. She wondered why some clients were chronically worried with the appearance of a whore as if the escapade would end in a white wedding.

The man motioned that she turned around. She swung on her heels like a model coming to the end of a ramp. After a moment, he tapped her shoulder. She turned to face him, in time to see him

nodding satisfaction to Madam Brigitte, who curtsied slightly, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

With an air of distinction, the visitor walked round the room looking at glossy posters of Lady Gaga, Gwen Stefani, the Pussycat Dolls and Nelly Furtado on the walls. She followed him with her eyes, wondering if he was playing sophisticated, or he was the shy type scrounging for a way of breaking the ice. From experience, most men would've taken her as soon as Madam Brigitte left, and sought her acquaintance or toured the room when they were flaccid beyond arousal.

She studied him with a view to placing him. He was aristocratic, likely a well-known businessman or political figure out to let out some steam. His greying hair was close-cropped, his skin speckle-free, his eyes calculating. There were chances he was older than sixty, but perhaps courtesy of a strict diet, first-class physicians, exercise regimes and cosmetic surgery at some stage, he was rejuvenated.

Heidi remained mum. Couching stipulated that under the circumstances she had to speak when spoken to. But within she pitied him; he was so chivalrous in manner and bearing that he shouldn't have allowed room for indulgence in him. Something about him reminded her of Father Gaynor, a reserved and holier-than-thou man by appearance, which impinged on her the fact that every man was fallible.

Had the man held a Bible, he might've fooled the world as a priest. Perhaps he was one far from his congregants. Some men of the cloth were merely priests by profession. Her thoughts went to Father Gaynor; how he violated every orifice in her body and cried like a moron with pleasure.

"How old are you, wee Rosella?" he asked, paused before a poster, his back to her. His voice was a trifle gruff and tenor, his tone not British in the slightest. If he were British, then he was by assimilation; otherwise he was Norwegian, Italian, Australian or something else—she couldn't place his accent.

He had called her *wee Rosella*. Was he despising her age and prematurely underestimating her capabilities? "I'm sixteen going on seventeen, sir." A blatant lie meant to stoke the fire in him.

“How old do you suppose I am?” He spoke like a cardinal at an altar, but his voice was trenchant. “Make a wild guess, I won’t be offended.”

She giggled childishly. It enhanced her commercial appeal to present herself as a child to him. “I think you’re at least sixty, sir.”

Leaning the cane against the wall, he turned, crossed and stood before her. “Your body can make Gisele Bündchen and Christie Brinkley emerald-green with envy.” He held her chin in his left hand and, stooping slightly, peered into her eyes. “Heidi Klum eyes,” he said in admiration, “You must be on a catwalk in Paris or New York City. You’ve the stuff of supermodels.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But what do I see in your eyes... tenderness, vulnerability, incisiveness, mistrust or false love?” He continued to peer into her eyes. “I see two things, wee Rosella. I see unscrupulous seduction and ambition. It’s gratifying to notice you aren’t without ambition. If you were without it, you would’ve been as dismal and devastating as a beautiful woman without a womb or hips.”

Heidi pouted her lips, narrowed her eyes and began undoing her dress. It fell around her ankles and she stepped out of it. The bikini top joined the dress on the floor.

“How did you get into this business?” With his free hand, he removed his hat and cast it on the bed. The necktie followed. His auburn hair was as greying as his manicured buffalo-horn moustache. “Where’re the hidden cameras in this room?” He asked in a whisper.

“No cameras, sir, I assure you.” Shockingly, his eyes strayed once to her exposed breasts and came to roost on her face. She feared Madam Brigitte, despite her thorough screening procedures, had let in a police officer. “I’m not a whore, sir. I’m a ballerina. I’ve a contract with the château.”

“Contract?” He laughed, fingered her blonde hair and placed the hand on her shoulder. His touch was delicate.

“Records in the administrative office will confirm that I’m a ballerina just like all the girls here.”

“I don’t mean trouble, my darling, and I’m no policeman or detective. Madam Brigitte is a good friend of mine. She was my girlfriend when she was living in Paris before you were born.”

“At this point, sir, you ought to be telling me how I can pleasure you.”

“I’m Mr Scott Randall. I’m an international freelance broker from Birmingham. You’ll call me Mr Randall.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr Randall. You’ll call me Rose or Rosella.” *Not wee Rosella, you unromantic fool!*

“Rosella is a pretty name. It’s unique, I must say. What does it mean?”

“A rosella is a tiny, colourful African parrot,” she said timidly. “But you’ll realise I’m not talkative.”

“Rosella is obviously a false name. I won’t call you by that name.”

“How can I trust you?”

“I’m a good man, my girl, though I’m not a saint. Perhaps I can salvage you from Château Richelieu. Your eyes betray your unhappiness here.”

“I’m happy here. I don’t think I was designed for anything else except what I do here.”

He straightened, went to a couch in a corner and sat in it, his legs crossed, his hands gracefully in his lap. “I told you my true name—Scott Randall.” He reached into an inner breast pocket of his jacket, took out a plastic ID card and threw it across the room at Heidi’s feet. “Do you insist I call you Rosella?”

Time stood still as she stood forlorn beside the bed. From that height she couldn’t read the information on the card, but clearly it was British; she inferred from the coat-of-arms and seals in its corners. In his eyes she read sexual disinterest and sheer curiosity. “What’ve names got to do with sex?”

“It depends on the reason for my coming. What do you see when you look at me?”

“An Interpol officer... a pretender. Does Madam Brigitte know why you’re here?”

“She doesn’t know. Put on your clothes and sit down.”

She wriggled into the dress, left its spinal zip undone and sat on the edge of the bed, her back almost turned to him. A furtive glance downwards, on the card, revealed the names printed on it—*Scott Randall*.

“If you want me to have a go, tell me bad things about yourself. Tell me things that can make God weep. I get my kicks from sorrow and tragedies. Tell me what you go through in this trade.”

If the man wasn’t a police officer, he was a time-waster. “If you’re an officer from the French authorities you’re working against yourself. I’ll nail you in court.”

“You’re interesting. How?”

“A police officer isn’t allowed to be alone in the same room as a minor. It’s the two of us in here. I’ll inform the magistrate that you slept with me. I can rent my clothes now and scream.”

“There’re chances you’re threatening an archangel sent to bless you. Be very sure, wee Rosella, before you blunder.” He looked about for a while. “This place might look and feel splendid, but it’s a prison in every way, shape and form. You’re leading the life of an iguana up a hollow log. What’s your name?”

“How can I be sure you aren’t wired?”

He rose slowly, grinning, shrugged out of his jacket and began undoing the buttons of his shirt. “A couple of years from now,” he spoke stolidly, fatherly, “your life as a hooker will stagnate. Naturally, hookers become stale and phase out. A large chunk of life is passing you by while men waste you.”

In a philosophical way, he spoke sobering sense. Looking back, she realised it was perhaps the first time she had been the subject of a personal discussion in which she was a participant. Her life, insignificant as it was in her own eyes, was on a dais and a man old enough to be her father or grandfather was discussing and fairly projecting it. Having been initially abused when she was a tender eleven years old, an act that opened a hellish portal to further abuse at the hands of her foster father when she was fourteen, Heidi already felt odd, futile and stale—a nuisance to herself and the world.

She felt he had an immortal understanding of life and its vicissitudes, and the understanding was beyond the dictates of his

ego. To prove a point he was stripping as if the mood was romantic. Perhaps it was. Perhaps it was a gimmick that would wind with them in bed, which would be an anticlimax because she was finding him too sophisticated. Within minutes, he was in his underwear only, a white garment sagging with his genitalia, all his clothes draped on the backrest of the couch. He had the figure of a professional athlete.

“See... no hidden cameras or microphones,” he said, unmindful of his semi-nudity, gesturing at his body as though it belonged to a mannequin. “What do you think an archangel looks like?”

Finding his composure absurd, his assessment incisive and his questions threatening, but half-smiling at his antics, she decided to drive him away through the avenue of his choice. Fabricating a baloney of lies for that effect required time and effort. “My name is Heidi Gaynor,” she addressed the wall she was facing. “I lost my virginity to my brother at eleven. At fourteen I seduced my father and priest. Before I found a place here I was a homeless brat roaming the Docklands of London from St. Katharine Docks to North Woolwich. I slept with yuppies and all sorts of Asian and African emigrants working as builders and janitors in the area. Warts and venereal diseases scarred my body.”

“You need to give your ragamuffin life some dignity.” He sank in the couch, shameless and at ease, like an emperor in his rightful throne.

“I don’t know my mother or father. If I met them I would strangle them. I hate God. I also hate perverts for buying sex.”

Mr Randall clapped his hands dramatically. “You’re a coiled mamba, Heidi, full of venom and bitterness. For interest’s sake, why are you against sex-buyers?”

“It’s an emotion, not a commodity. I hate it when I shed clothes and lie down with strangers. Deep down I want to fall in love and get married. I want to kiss and exchange verbal delicacies with someone my age.” Expecting to see him vexed, she turned and faced him. “Are you still interested in me?”

“Of course, Heidi, I am.” His countenance was nonchalant. “I came as a businessman, not a pervert. If I were a paedophile I

would've flown to an Asian country. No point to fish in a rivulet if one wants mackerel."

"What brought you here, Mr Randall, if I may ask?"

"I've already disclosed to you that I'm an international broker. I'm into farm produce, elite cars and anything that can bring a financial haul my way. My offices are in Birmingham, Johannesburg, Sydney, Washington and Rio de Janeiro." He stood up and began putting on his clothes, starting with the trousers. "I'm married to a beautiful Corsican wife. All my mistresses are in my employ, which eliminates sex as my reason for coming to Château Richelieu. Any man my age has had more than enough sex in his life."

"I've slept with men older than you by far. You aren't an octogenarian, are you?"

"I'm not trying to argue, my darling, but at least to prove a point before I disclose my mission that'll surely revamp your life. I liked it very much when you categorically stated your disinterest in the trade you find yourself in." He tucked his shirt in his trousers, cuffed the sleeves of his shirt and reached for his jacket.

"You leave me hanging, Mr Randall. I don't know if I should continue to entertain your absurdities or shout for security."

He busied himself with ensuring he was properly dressed as he spoke to her. "I'm a father and a businessman, but foremost I'm the latter. Without a flourishing business my foreign wife wouldn't have married me and my mistresses would've been dating other men. I'm more of a mercenary than anything else, and I'm interested—from a business perspective—in people like you with the same approach to life." He stopped abruptly and looked at her questioningly. "How low can you stoop for money, Heidi? I need an honest answer."

"Prostitution, whether by a superlative whore in New York City or a pathetic one in Mogadishu, is the lowest ebb."

"Precisely, but please don't despise your trade so much."

"Some clients bring their German shepherds and Labradors. I sleep with dogs. What's lower than that, Mr Randall?"

"I suppose it makes you more hardened than a Sudanese war veteran, which works well for me." He slipped into his shoes and resumed his seat. "You're entombed in an indecent and

dehumanising obscurity, but *buried* all the same. Have you ever been to Africa?”

“You suppose I should be in Bujumbura, not Nancy?”

“Are you prepared to reside in Africa? That might be what it takes to get you out of this bestial quandary.”

“It depends on what’s on offer. I can go to Cape Horn in Argentina, or Severnaya Zemlya in Siberia, if there’s life to be made there.”

“Good.” He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and drew a wad of hundred-euro banknotes. “There’s a good bid in Pretoria, something someone in their right senses cannot ignore.” He shifted his weight and cleared his throat unnecessarily. “A friend of mine, very prominent in his country, wishes to hire a girl of your calibre.”

“As a mistress?”

“No,” he said strongly, almost protesting. “He wants a personal assistant or something like that. He’s a business mogul and a distinguished politician. He hopes to run for the presidency of South Africa very soon.”

“Is South Africa bereft of PAs?”

“The man is particularly interested in a white English-speaking girl. In Africa we still have black malcontents who believe in employing white people—their former colonisers—to enhance their personality.”

“I went up to Form Three. I’m a school dropout, Mr Randall.”

“It doesn’t matter. What’s important is that you must know a bit of shorthand and filing.” He pulled out a bunch of crisp notes and held them out to her. “This is January the thirteenth. You’ll take this money and fly to London where you’ll meet me. I’ll enrol you with a prestigious college for a crash secretarial programme. By mid-February you’ll be in Pretoria or on a flight to that city. Take the money, Heidi.”

She wanted to hide her excitement, but her eyes beamed with it. She stared at the money. “How do I leave the château, Mr Randall? We’re kept here like prisoners. Madam Brigitte has my passport.”

“You’ll find a way, or make one. This deal involves lump sums. For as long as you shall be at his mansion I’ll be paid handsomely

every month. You'll negotiate your payment directly with him. Take the money, Heidi. You'll live in luxury."

"What about my passport?"

"You won't need it, darling. By the end of the day tomorrow you'll answer to a different name and you'll have a new set of documents including a passport."

She studied his bearing and the lines on his face, quietly comparing brothel life with the unknown risk in Dark Africa's Pretoria. He didn't look evil. Heidi Gaynor rose gingerly and walked to him.

Chapter 2

In one accord, Premier Moagi Makgunda flowed and mingled with the throngs of white tourists swarming the Vatican. Regrettably, he noticed that many people found the Seven-hilled city a vast monument ever awe-inspiring and paling other archaic resorts including the Egyptian Pyramids and the Victoria Falls. Despite the morning being sunny and almost totally cloudless, an unforgiving cold blemished the day. Many people were in overcoats, woollen hats and gloves.

Had the man he was about to meet on the sacred ground been agreeable, he should've met him at the museum of St Basil Cathedral in Moscow, or on a Kremlin thoroughfare. Whenever an opportunity availed itself and he had the time, Moagi flew to Moscow and often crossed the Urals range of mountains by train to tour the Siberian towns of Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk. The peoples, plains and vegetation of Asiatic Russia fascinated him.

Among Russians, he felt at peace and secure though children eyed him strangely, others merrily, for his skin colour and hair. Those who thought him joyous came to pinch and fidget with him assuming he was a goodwill clown out to break the monotony in the streets.

Like most visitors to the Vatican, the premier showed interest in Bramante's basilica, the marble statues overlooking St Peter's Square, Bernini's colonnade, the Appian Way, the Trevi Fountain, Michelangelo's dome in the Sistine Chapel, and listened closely to the Roman guide blathering about the history of the revered shrine; the coronation of Emperor Charlemagne, the burial of St Peter's relics and the Renaissance that gave the place a facelift.

When others made the cross or paused in silence touched by the grandeur and reverence of the place, the premier did likewise, but inwardly perplexed how Europeans were able to construct an architectural marvel at a time his African ancestors were still in caves

and dependent on hunting and gathering, and roots and tubers were the staple diet.

Whenever the guide fell silent, the tourists erupted in many languages, chattering like wagtails ready for mating. He discerned Spanish, Greek, German, French and English, the speakers of the latter beside themselves with excitement on a promise they would be accorded time to meet the Pope.

The politician appeared to share their excitement; he was an atheist averse to God, Catholicism and the idea of entombing a saint's relics and passing that for the foundation of the Church. It was absurd that the learned prelates and archbishops, from time immemorial hitherto, had created themselves cardinals and popes in a manmade pagan shrine with a dead man's bones to show for it. Yet the same soutane-donning men disparaged the peoples and gods of the rest of the world for beliefs the cardinals deemed barbarian and evil-judging, which was out of sync with the scriptures. He believed the whole Catholic Establishment was an elaborate hoax.

For a pure breed African born and raised in the tropics, the weather was extremely unfriendly. He was tired of listening to the names of popes, painters, sculptors and architects whose artistic prowess shaped and reshaped the Vatican over the centuries. Of pretending to marvel, he was tired. Hopefully, if he lived long enough he would construct a colossal landmark in his country, something to show he once lived.

Already he had a mesmeric mansion among other innate properties in Pretoria and Johannesburg. He believed in leaving an undeletable mark on the face of the world and forever saluted the architects of the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Kremlin and other monumental constructions.

An hour later the premier adjusted his overcoat, turned up the collar and made his way to the Vatican Museum for the purpose of his visit. His gait was unassuming. Not even once did he look over his shoulder. Except glancing at his wristwatch to be certain he would be on time to rendezvous with a man he understood was already on the premises and perhaps monitoring him personally, he

walked calmly through passages and corridors, crossed open areas and descended some steps until he came to the museum.

While of necessity narcissistic and impressionistic, the Vatican Museum, like the rest of the buildings, stood in unending mystery to its visitors. The premier stepped on its high-roofed, colonnaded veranda, and walked through its wooden doors, leather-padded portals grandiose in every aspect.

Scores of tourists fussed in the museum's ornate chambers. He didn't allow himself to be mesmerised by the building's treasures he saw as vestiges of a false religion founded on greed, hegemony and treachery. Actually he pitied the tourists for their open reverence and veneration of the artefacts as they toured under the calculated tones of curates.

Couldn't they see this was vanity upon vanity? Weren't they aware atrocious crimes and paedophile were committed throughout the centuries in the so-called hallowed buildings and its satellite establishments in Germany, Thailand, Africa and Latin America? The politician saw a well-oiled, age-old machine designed to hoodwink the world ruthlessly until every man and woman believed the Holy See was indeed God's representative on earth and Catholicism was the Faith.

As he walked, he couldn't help wondering why an organisation alleged to be super-rich did nothing to alleviate the desperation in Haiti after the earthquake. Why was the Church indifferent to the famine in Somalia and the devastation that crippled large parts of Japan after the Tsunami? He concluded the Cardinals of the Curia were as pagan and heartless as the millionaire congressmen of the USA and Britain's cabinet members. Despite their worth in pounds and US dollars, the names of these politicians were hardly mentioned in humanitarian deeds. Who was going to pry open the eyes of the masses... Siddhartha Gautama, Muhammad, Jesus Christ of Nazareth?

Faking interest in the supposedly hallowed exhibits flanking his way, and occasionally pausing to look closely, he made his way to the chamber housing gilded portraits and pieces pertaining to Pope Pius XII who died in 1958. A solitary figure in a broad-rim hat, dark

glasses and an overcoat walked forlornly through the displays, his head was bowed all the time, a precaution against the watchful lens of overhead cameras. Beyond the chamber was a more popular one holding Pope John Paul II's items; the cassocks, high mitres, skullcaps, pairs of Italian red shoes and the catafalque he lay-in-state in. It also displayed framed printouts of his famous speeches.

The billionaire caught up with the man, André Giovanni Puccini alias Mr Scott Randall, and stood beside him. He knew what André was—an international criminal believed to have interests in Colombian and Afghan drug syndicates. In Canada he was a banned man though the Canadian government believed he was living in Vancouver as a citizen under a false name. Without failure the Canadian authorities monthly published his picture as a wanted man in one of their national newspapers, the *Globe & Mail*.

Ten years ago, Mr Scott Randall was arrested and later released before plea for child-trafficking in Cambodia. Officially the release came after the prosecution failed to develop evidence against the Sicilian, but the hushed truth was that his associates killed many state witnesses in villages and threatened senior prosecutors and judges in Phnum Pénh. The premier would rather not be seen with him for his reputation and the safeguarding of his political dreams; otherwise he might not ascend the steps of the Union Building, the national government offices in Pretoria.

“He was a jolly good fellow,” André said casually, his eyes on the portrait of Pope Pius XII before him.

“Sort of,” Makgunda answered, matter-of-factly. “He was no better actor than Karol Wojtyla. The Vatican is a stage for an ever-unfolding opera of lunatics.” He lowered his voice. “How goes it, André?”

“No names,” he retorted between gritted teeth. “Why do you ask, have you brought my payment?”

“The girl first. FOB Pretoria according to our agreement.”

“Of course, sir, of course; I was just trying to be conversational.”

An elderly couple holding hands strayed towards them and came to look at the same pieces.

“The world will never have a pope of the same silk unless God reconsiders.”

“Papa was a gift to the world though Second World War Jews saw a different picture,” the premier nodded as the couple wandered away and out of earshot. “Tell me about the hunt.” he resorted to whispers, never turning to look at the man.

“She’s now in London. Her name is Heidi Gaynor. I found her two days ago at an illegal brothel in Nancy. I told her I was an international freelance broker.”

“I hope you didn’t find me an anaemic drag queen. How old is she?”

“Kindergarten material. Sixteen going on seventeen. That’s what she told me. I believed her.”

“Is she beautiful? I mean, is she a world-class beauty?”

“That was the agreement. We agreed she had to be white, young and very pretty. Some of your terms were relative, like *very pretty*.”

“*Very pretty* means *very pretty*. Tell me more.”

Never did they glance at each other as if they were reserved strangers standing side by side to view the artefacts, and making acquaintance was anathema to both.

“By mid-February she’ll be all yours. I tricked her into taking a crush shorthand course in the UK. I smuggled her out of Château Richelieu in my car boot at night. She believes a mogul in South Africa needs a PA.”

“Where’re her people?”

“Nobody watches her back. She doesn’t know if her blood is English, Polish or Eskimo. Her foster family disowned her when she was fourteen.”

“Any chances she might return to France?” The premier searched for a facial reflection of the Italian in the glass panels and portraits in front of him. Expression-aided communication shortened sentences and time, but the search for his reflection was vain.

“Your answer is in the *L’Express* and the *Le Nouvel*.”

“What do you mean? Stop being dramatic, André—”

“I told you no names!” the man hissed.

“I’m sorry. I forget. I don’t have the aptitude.”

“After I took her out I contacted my friends in the French police. They raided the brothel yesterday. The story is in the papers.”

“Was that expedient?”

“You wanted a girl who would stay until the Second Coming. That was my bit in ensuring she had no home to turn to. She’s the appropriate candidate by any means. I’m Sicilian, my friend.”

“How can I believe you?”

“Belief is stuff for malcontents. Both of us are businessmen. Wait until the product is at your doorstep. You’ll pick an envelope and a copy of the *L’Express* in Cardinal Petrucille Guicciardini’s pigeonhole in the western atrium of St Peters. Look for pigeonhole number seventy-one.”

“Perhaps the cardinal has collected what you meant for me.”

“Cardinal Guicciardini is on vacation on an island in the Galapagos.”

The premier smiled. “You’re meticulous.”

“We’re businessmen. We’re also friends not to be done without.”

“I’m flying out of Rome tonight. We’ll communicate through our usual channels until I make the money transfer to your girlfriend. Should you need anything don’t hesitate to inform me.”

Moagi Makgunda strolled away as did André Giovanni Puccini, the Sicilian, in the opposite direction, blending with the awed tourists. As usual, the politician feigned interest in frieze and frissetta panels, cenotaphs of Roman Catholic saints consumed by Protestant and Islamic uprisings, busts, bas-relief presentations and tableau in Apennines marble depicting past popes.

At the exit, he looked over his shoulder and scanned the throngs. André Giovanni Puccini had vanished.

Chapter 3

After ceremoniously making a donation of two million rand to the director of the Art Museum at the corner of Schoeman and Wessels Street, Moagi Makgunda walked out of the grand building, a swarm of journalists dogging him. In Gauteng Province, from Pretoria to Johannesburg, right to the rural limits of his jurisdiction, he was always a man of the moment.

The week before, amid pomp and fanfare, he had donated three million rand worth of medicines and blankets to the superintendent of Tshwane Hospital, formerly Pretoria Hospital, and as was the case today, excited local and foreign journalists mobbed him from the building to his car.

He was a politician; donating for the sake of making news fanned his career, at least from an academic perspective. The society respected him for his generosity and wealth, not his premiership. As premier, he was a haranguing ideologue, almost good for nothing. But as a humanitarian and philanthropist he was extraordinarily pragmatic, and might ascend to the presidency of the country on that ticket.

Being the unmarked boundary between Sunnyside and Arcadia neighbourhood of eastern Pretoria, gleeful, over permissive and repulsive in the same vein for its roaming, scantily-dressed teenage prostitutes of extraordinary beauty, shrieking fruit vendors and their orange and banana-laden carts and the city's bustle of strollers and loafers, many people filled the pavements of the suburb's jacaranda-lined streets.

When he looked at it, the city was a compound of melodious Vienna, hurly-bustling London and intriguing Munich, panel-beaten into an exotic city exuding beauty, majestic art and a mystic bearing. The garden city was an impressive collection of historic buildings, zoological gardens, alabaster fountain memorials of pioneering colonialists, whistling palm trees, green lawns and cooing pigeons.

Moagi Makgunda arrived at the elite Steve Biko Academy Hospital in an austere S65 AMG six-door Mercedes Benz limousine. Chauffeured and accompanied by a uniformed police sergeant, an authoritative air hovered over the premier as he issued from the backseat of the vehicle carrying a fruit hamper. For security reasons, the officer couldn't carry the fruits; a bodyguard's hands had to be free all the time for unimpeded reaction.

The premier's presence evoked both male and female attention, but the latter loudly and openly admired him. In Africa wealthy men never stopped marrying or multiplying the number of their concubines. Though the open adoration mortified him, the whorish glamour on the pavements didn't distract him.

He wasn't at the hospital to gawk at the suburb's half-dressed, wholly decadent girls, but to visit his ailing brother, Lebokang, in Unit 912 on the ninth floor. Lebokang Makgunda was gravely ill. So far there was neither diagnosis nor prognosis; therefore there was no optimism he would live, especially when the hue of death was upon him and the doctors had started dosing him with morphine. The premier understood the administration of the drug as a prelude to death. For the past month Lebokang had been turning into inanimate grey matter.

People who recognised the politician in the carport greeted him with awe, humility and respect. He was forty-one and the youngest provincial governor in the history of the new South Africa. A front-page US dollar billionaire and a flamboyant tycoon whose business empire kept expanding like magical dough, he was a role model to many.

Without breaking stride, he smiled civilly and waved at the people. A favourite of the President of the Republic who took him to Beijing, Bangkok, Jakarta and Washington DC on numerous occasions, the electorate was of the belief the current leadership was grooming him for the presidency and hoped to see him become the minister of Foreign Affairs, an irrefutable sign that he was the chosen one. From the quantum leaps he made on the political front, a niggling conviction assured him he would hold the reins some day

and move around with a cortege, not a police sergeant as was presently obtaining.

Lilies, ferns and chrysanthemums were awash in the hospital's flowerbeds, lending a merry appearance to the institution's thirty-eight storey building, especially its gargantuan façade. The premier mulled on the trickery in the beauty. Unlike a starred hotel, the Crown Plaza, Sheraton or the Meikles in the city; any hospital was a place of either recovery or death, which was why a mortuary was a prerequisite.

A streak of lightening brought his gaze up. Billows of dark clouds, tumultuous and intense, were gathering, spewing from the Magaliesberg, a cruel-looking range of mountains in the north. A blue vault, earlier gay and seducing, was turning into a frowning tabula marquee.

The sergeant walked behind him from the carport. They went through the glassy doors of the institution and into a lift, one of three in a portal facing the reception counter. As it took them to the ninth floor, the ascension struck a chord in him about what he would do on ascending the presidency; establishing rapport with the European Union and every country in the world. Within three months of his election he would visit Downing Street, the White House, the Kremlin and the Elyse. No doubt existed in his mind that he would soar like an eagle—everything was in place and he felt it in his bones.

The politician and the sergeant issued into a corridor. Half a dozen patients in striped hospital garb shuffled in the passage so perverted with medicines that it smelled as if truckloads of molasses and humus were stashed somewhere in the building. Doctors, nurses and sanitary personnel rushed up and down in the throes of their duties. The premier and the sergeant negotiated their way through the traffic.

When they were at Unit 410, the door to 412 opened and a diminutive man came out stuffing an animal tail wand into a tattered duffle bag. The man was laden with charms; amulets and beads irrefutably betraying his occupation as a *sangoma*, diviner—the showy type that wore their curios on top of their clothes like mayoral medals.

The sergeant stood guard in the corridor as the premier entered the room reeking of incense, snuff and burnt herbs. Lerato, Lebokang wife's, sat still on a bedside bench, staring at her husband on the bed, her back to the door.

"How're you?" he said to her, heading to a steel table by the wall to place the hamper, nonchalant to the smoky, nauseating air. "And how's he today?"

She didn't answer. He took it she was depressed and desperate; hence she had invited a Zulu diviner to perform some rituals in the room before the premier's arrival. Many indigenous South Africans believed that evil spirits were responsible for every illness.

"How's he today?" he repeated, crossing to stand beside her.

"He's your elder brother," her tone was ecliptic, "ask him." She didn't look at the politician, which was enough conformation she was angry with him.

"We've a situation, sister," he said, his voice low and acerbic. "Let's not create a scene in this hospital." He came short of inquiring from her what the *sangoma* might've said regarding the illness, but coughed on a second thought. The *sangoma*'s divination might be the source of her anger.

He looked down at his elder brother. The man on the bed, angular, venous and bony, was dying. Looking at the ceiling, Lebokang's face was a mask of pain attesting to a hapless man feeling death in every part of his body. His breathing was erratic and laboured. A tube fed him intravenously.

In a week Lebokang would turn forty-eight. From the look of it he would be dead by then, or would die on his birthday as was the case with the rest of the siblings and their children who died. The Makgundas were mostly dying on their birthdays, an anomie fact. Lebokang was his last living brother; two brothers, three sisters and a majority of their children died in the past eighteen years from freak accidents to diseases. A montage of his dead siblings and their children lying in caskets flickered in Moagi's mind.

"How're you feeling today?" he asked his brother.

Slowly, the patient turned and faced the wall, expressionless, distant.

Lebokang was a schoolteacher for the visually impaired, or visually challenged, like he used to say. In his heyday he bragged that he taught blind children to develop a sense of laterality and directionality, for them to tell their left from their right hand, their face from their bottom, and move from place A to B with minimum help. The proud special-needs teacher who used to lecture needlessly to anyone caring to listen, mentioning awkward terms like gross motor movement, postural abnormalities, factual discrimination and residual vision, now seemingly lay partially immobilised and blinded by a nameless disease.

The teacher lay emptied of the technical terms supposed to aid him in his moment of incapacitation. The premier thought of him as an army general deserted by his lieutenants, a crucified Jesus suffering abandonment by his disciples. He visited so that his brother wouldn't experience a sense of neglect and to express solidarity with Lerato, his sister-in-law; otherwise the Sunnyside teacher was a man with one foot in the grave already.

"Your brother is dying," Lerato said; her voice accusing. "Can't you do something?"

"The *something* I did was to bring him to Steve Biko from Tshwane Hospital and foot all the bills ever since. I suppose I'm a good man. Won't you tell me what the *sangoma* said?"

"It was for my ears only."

"We must pull together, Lerato," he breathed, "or we won't avert a loss here."

"Won't you pity your blood brother, Moagi?" Acid was in her voice, and she didn't look at the premier.

"Is it about pitying him or what medicine proffers? I don't understand."

She sprang from the bench and faced him in a rage. "Swear by the name of God that you really don't understand!"

Eyeball to eyeball, they breathed into each other's nostrils. "Are you accusing me, Lerato?"

"Moagi, swear by His holy name that you don't understand!"

"I might not be a perfect Catholic," he said calmly, "but I know I'm not allowed to swear by the name of God. I'm resisting the devil."

"That's precisely what I stood up to do."

"Can a woman who trusts in *sangomas* resist the devil?"

"You came to wait on him die while you play the Good Samaritan."

"I don't blame you. You lost all your children and you fear you might lose him. Life and death lie with God, Mrs Makgunda."

"The power of life and death lies on the tongue. Say the word and your brother will rise from this bed."

"What's this, a theological contest?"

"Say the word, Moagi," she was calming, "or his blood shall be upon your hands."

"What word? You're depressed. Don't damn yourself in the eyes of God, Lerato."

"The *sangoma* warned us against you." Fire returned in her eyes. "He mentioned you by name."

He suddenly grabbed the labels of her collar and shook her twice so violently that the appendage nearly tore off. "Can the *sangoma* prove it? Watch your mouth, Lerato, or you'll force me to sue you for character defamation."

She pried his hands off her collar. "How do you explain the illnesses and deaths that have dogged the family for almost two decades now?"

"Oh, when relatives fall ill or die I ought to explain things to Lerato? What do you see in me... an unregistered seer... a gypsy clairvoyant?"

"Do you want an honest answer, Moagi?"

He sighed, stepped a pace back and shrugged his shoulders. "God, I'm wasting my time with this woman here."

"How did you become a business mogul? How did a young man like you become the premier of Gauteng Province?"

"Are you accusing me of delving in juju?"

"God will punish you, Moagi."

"Is that your prayer?"

“You’re a heartless actor... a serial killer with the appearance of a saint. The *sangoma* confirmed it.”

He laughed drily. “Of course, we’re Africans, but we no longer carry assegais and live in caves. We’re born with different gifts and the blueprint of what we’ll become. I hold a degree in Economics and I’ve a penchant to sway the masses. I went to the University of Pretoria and rose through the ranks of the ANC until the echelons of the party noticed my potential. And you call that juju.”

“There’s blood on your hands.”

“Can you prove your allegations, Lerato?” He showed her his palms. “Can you stand in a court of law and furnish it with evidence?”

“I’m not going to any earthly court, Moagi. Pray that God exonerates you or I’ll shred you to ribbons with my hands.”

“That would be a manifestation of the evil dormant in your heart, Lerato.”

“It is written: *God will judge the unrighteous.*”

“God will also judge poor people like you. It’s a curse and a sin to be poor. You offend God with your poverty.”

She raised a silencing hand. “Please spare me the heresy; you aren’t Christian.”

“Judge not, Lerato, so that you too will not be judged. At the moment you’re stressed, but the time will come when you’ll clearly see, or perhaps it shall be revealed to you, that I’m an archangel in the family and throughout Gauteng.”

Lerato chuckled mirthlessly and shook her head.

“God anointed me to hide your poverty and alleviate suffering in the family; yet you see a devilish character. The world condemns what it doesn’t understand.”

On the bed, Lebokang slowly turned from the wall, groaning and wincing, and stared in the premier’s direction. Tears dammed in the corners of his eyes before streaming to the pillow. Lerato and Moagi glued their eyes on him, the argument suspended.

“Archangel Gabriel,” Lerato said sarcastically, “you stand in the presence of God, have you brought your brother deliverance?”

He frowned. “*Your* husband is ill and you make scherzo of it.”

“Daily you come here and speak about God, but you’ve never prayed for Lebokang in our hearing. I’m dying to hear you rebuke what is afflicting him. Rebuke it, Moagi.”

“Are your prayers inadequate? Is it God’s will that I pray for him?”

“God’s will and thoughts are that we prosper and triumph over evil.”

“Everything that happens under the sun is God-bidden. Jesus conquered Death but didn’t eliminate it. The last enemy to be conquered is Death.”

She sank on the bench in dejection and anger. “What did Jesus say to Judas on the occasion of his arrest?”

“Tell me if you suppose it’ll revive your husband.”

“What thou came to do, do it quickly.” With a handkerchief, she wiped her husband’s tears.

“Your sense of drama is in bad taste, Lerato. How’re you able to utter such sardonic jokes under the circumstances?” He fished a thick wad of crisp hundred-rand banknotes from the inner breast pocket of his jacket and placed them on the pillow. “See to it that every bill is settled and he lacks nothing. Good day, Mrs Makgunda. God bless you.” He turned to his brother. “Lebokang, may the God that you believe in save you in your hour of need.”

“God damn you and your money, Moagi.” She began to cry, her eyes on the money. “God damn you.”

“God isn’t in the business of damning people. You’re praying to the Devil.” He adjusted his jacket, re-aligned his tie and walked towards the door.

In the passage, the sergeant nodded at him and trailed a pace behind him. The premier assumed the uniformed man hadn’t eavesdropped on the heated arguments. Lerato’s words and rueful facial expressions haunted him as he walked in a cocoon of condemnation. She had been daring to accuse him in his face, this Lerato, a stupid housewife failing to see the new source of her butter now that her husband was dying. Custom allowed him to inherit her as a wife in the event of her husband’s death.

Polygamy being synonymous with wealth and heartfelt consideration throughout Africa, though he wasn't thinking in that direction, he found her an unthankful virago and silently cursed her with the vilest epithets. He was the premier of Gauteng, South Africa's most industrious and commercial province, and sat in the Presidential Council. The President of the republic consulted him on all matters Gauteng. But Lerato was blind to that.

How had Lebokang offended God and their Pedi spirits to the extent of marrying such a quarrelsome maniac? Although he was indeed an Economics graduate from the University of Pretoria, he was aware his academia was frugal and knew it wasn't God who had blessed and excelled him above his peers.

Outside, the storm was still building in the sky.

They were walking towards the car when he heard Lerato's voice calling his name: "Moagi!" She called from a ninth floor window, her shrill voice rising above the gathering thunder. "Moagi!"

The politician stopped reluctantly, made a face and looked up, so did scores of people near the entrance and in the car park. Lerato Makgunda stood in a window looking down at him. Moagi gestured bafflement.

"Take your money, Moagi!" She threw the wad of money out the window. "I've no need for your ill-gotten money!"

Banknotes scattered in the air like confetti, initially triggering shocked sighs of disbelief from the public, a scramble and then a stampede. The sergeant joined the mayhem to the premier's disappointment. Some notes landed immediately, but many remained buoyant in the turbulence of the swirling stormy air, hovering and spreading over the car park like feathers.

Moagi felt disdain rising within him, his heart knotting. His fists clenched and unclenched repeatedly. Tears of fury stood in his eyes and blurred Lerato in the window. Dazed, he walked alone to the Mercedes limousine, carefully avoiding bumping into the criss-crossing people looking heavenwards. In the melee, he saw his chauffeur on his knees and shoving landing notes into his pockets.

"You're fired!" he screamed on walking up to his driver. "Give me the car keys, you lousy rat!" He blamed himself for coming to the

hospital without an entourage of his bodyguards, and thought that lately he was becoming a *habitué* of irresponsibility regarding his personal security. Had his bodyguards escorted him, he could now be assigning one of them to drive the S65 AMG Mercedes Benz.

The buoyancy of some banknotes continued to agitate the public. Though people grabbed most of the notes in mid-air amid fierce jostling and scuffles, the stampede started a rush that drew people from as far as Union and Dr Savage Road, and a few curious eagles that circled in the sky.

As the premier was getting into the driver's seat of the limousine, a white journalistic van marked 'SABC News' drove onto the premises. The premier clicked his tongue in anger and worried about his reputation.

Chapter 4

The morning sun had long risen from the peaks of the Magaliesberg when Regis Makgunda awoke partially imprisoned in webs, deathly spiders seemingly hanging guard over him. Ants roamed his limbs and belly. The stings he felt around the waistline of his trousers, in his groan and pubic hair, were testimony lice were prematurely breakfasting on him before he had taken anything.

The centre of his life, a homemade cart made from angle-iron, water pipes and two car wheels, stood on its axel by his side. He had removed the wheels the previous night to discourage thieves from stealing his cart. The wheels were worn out and in separate locations in the park's thick foliage of flowers.

Checking his bearings, he found he was on tawny lawn on the centre of a large rockery of shrubs and hibiscus in the middle of Burgers Park at the corner of Visagie and Van Der Walt St. Across Jacob Maré St to the south was the historic Victorian Melrose House, white-walled and red-roofed, in which the Treaty of Vereeniging, ending the Anglo-Boer War, was signed in 1902. Since the park started its life as a state-sponsored botanic garden in honour of Thomas François Burgers, the President of South Africa from 1872 to 1877, before it was converted into a recreational park, the amenity was vast, enchanting and full of colour and fascinations.

Regis was in a secluded spot in the park, a spot he had tarnished with the fires he lit at night to keep the cold and snakes at bay. Despite its beauty, there were many snakes in the park garden though incidents of snake bites were rare. The fire damaged the lawn and wilted the flowers close to his open-air *bedroom*, which made him and other vagrants unpopular with the municipal janitors who minded the park.

He was lying on loathsome grubs, slugs, centipedes and squashed millipedes. A fire from mainly cardboard boxes and newspapers he

had constantly stoked throughout the night, was now a sooty smouldering spot outside his prison. Except for the ants and the spiders, most of the insects scuttled away when he opened his eyes and stirred, yawning recklessly.

The smell from his armpits offended him. His teeth were so green, yellow and blue-black that he detested them. But they were better than his colleagues' teeth because at times he remembered to wash them with ash and water using his finger as a toothbrush. His hair was so unkempt and dirty that he couldn't be mistaken for a Rastafarian. His clothes were stained, soiled and worn out. The public safely categorised him as a lunatic. He believed an echidna led a better life than he did.

Experience told him vagrancy was perpetual hell. His poverty abject and phenomenal, he had every reason to believe he came into the world by mistake and was therefore unknown in Heaven. How could an educated man like him be so hapless in a resourceful country endowed with gold and diamonds?

If his two-year-old dejection and vagrancy continued unabated for a few more months, he feared an inexplicable psychosis that had crept in him would worsen to noticeable levels. In the two years he had lived in Pretoria's verandas and recreational parks, he noticed that a majority of the city's destitute people eventually went insane. They drifted into a world of soliloquy, wanton swearing and cursing, and scavenged for scraps of food in refuse bins.

He sat up from his makeshift pillow, a tattered duffle bag holding the residue of his life, and looked at the vistas of the city's buildings. Inside the buildings thousands of people enjoyed a life that could've been his as well had fate been less cruel with him. The skyscrapers, marvellous slices of European edifices, housed architects, engineers, salespersons, accountants, brokers, technicians, estate agents and other professionals.

With his Paramedics and Non-Destructive Testing (NDT) diplomas he would've easily fitted in some office, ambulance or workshop in Pretoria, or any other city, just like many people, but it appeared he was cursed. The blight not only derailed him from reaching his envisaged pinnacle of his life, which was running his

own fleet of ambulances or operating an NDT laboratory, but went on to shrink and thwart his world.

Suspecting he wasn't vagrant by his own doing, he was convinced he was a victim of purposeful evil and Hon. Moagi Makgunda, his late father's brother, was the culprit. His father, Tankiso, the firstborn in the premier's family, died miserably from a sudden migraine headache initially diagnosed as cerebral meningitis. The disease afflicted him after rain soaked him on his way home from their local shops.

Tankiso died within a week howling and frothing in a private hospital when Regis was in remand prison. Further tests, so his mother and people later told Regis, proved the diagnosis wrong. After a two-day post mortem, a pathologist wrote on his death certificate that he had succumbed to cardiovascular complications arising from pneumonia.

Regis knew the doctor had stated pneumonia as a gap-filler; he couldn't omit the cause of death. It was said his father's body was marred with surgical stitches at the time of its burial; evidence that pathologists had had a field day on the corpse. How could a vagrant like him confront wealthy and powerful Moagi and tell him that he was the reason the Makgundas faced extinction?

He was nostalgic of his former life—his carefree school days in Mamelodi Township when he courted pretty girls and played competitive soccer in all the schools he attended up to matriculation. He missed his college stints as a student activist and an all-categories award winner at De Veries Academy and Tshwane Polytechnic. Growing up studious and somewhat of a luminary among his peers, he never thought he would wound destitute and hopeless in his country.

Often he wished he would die and put an end to his misery and shame. He couldn't stand meeting some of the people, now responsible parents and citizens he attended the same schools and college institutions with. Though many couldn't recognise him, those who did were astounded and hurt. They asked him what happened to the guy with a genius for Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry. If he told them of his suspicion that Hon. Moagi Makgunda, his uncle, was

possibly delving in juju and sorcery to the detriment of a lineage, how would it stop his misery? It wasn't their business to know.

Regis began his day by quickly checking in his bag if he hadn't lost anything to thieves during the night. In it were two pairs of trousers, one an eye-sore, the other almost decent, for special occasions, a dog-eared Bible without covers, a stained formal shirt, T-shirt, a half-full bottle of Smirnoff Vodka and a towel.

On this day, January the nineteenth, he remembered, he was two months from his twenty-seventh birthday. The coming birthday was an insignificant milestone; his life had nothing notable to celebrate. The agony of it, wretched among beaming strollers, gay roses, blooming jacaranda trees and bougainvillea, ruthlessly gnawed his senses.

Between the pages of the Bible, he drew a photograph of his ex-lover and looked at the picture closely. Agnes Lamola was tall and beautiful, a living jewel, the best thing that ever happened to him. Music, reading novels and dreaming of a joyous future in harmony and in extravagance were their common factors. She was a student nurse at Pretoria Nursing College. For three years they dated, usually walking hand-in-hand and singing South African and Celine Dion's hits together, until two and a half years ago when a nameless disaster came between them when he proudly took her on a visit to the premier's mansion in Wonderboom.

Tears stood in his eyes. He was averse to remembering what happened, yet it always came back to him whenever he looked at the photograph—the horror, the fear and the panic he suffered. Yet he couldn't live within the framework of his sensibilities if he skipped looking at the picture for a single day. Though she was no longer in his life, she was the reason he held on, the carrot that forbade him to commit suicide, a biblical verse speaking of hope and the sacredness of human life, a flicker of light suggestive of an escape and a better tomorrow.

Above all, the photograph reminded him that he once fitted in the society and was in love with a gorgeous student nurse. She was an admirable memory though she was now married to a ferocious, alcoholic and paraplegic Zulu husband. No shred of a chance existed

that she would ever be his again whether he remained vagrant or stepped out of his situation. But pessimism was never his province.

The desire to impress his girlfriend and at the same time inform his affluent uncle about their marital intentions and seek his assistance in raising the bride-price became Regis' undoing. Foremost, Moagi Makgunda expressed happiness at the prospect of Pedis from Limpopo Province marrying. His uncle promised to meet all the marital demands from Agnes family, foot the wedding bill and buy them a Jaguar XKR-S or the latest Lexus and a house in the city. The premier threw a party for the couple. Cakes, snacks and alcoholic beverages abounded.

Everything was beyond Regis' expectation. But the merrymaking ended in a fiasco when he slid into a drunken stupor and woke up twenty-four hours later bloodied, confused and lying in a bathtub in the villa. In his left hand he held a pair of Agnes' lacy crimson panties. The garment was ripped and bloody. He dropped it in the tub.

Agnes was nowhere to be seen and her cell-phone was not reachable. Cooks, gardeners and maids fled him on sight. The furniture in the main lounge upstairs was in disarray. Drying blotches of blood were on the carpet and on walls. He went through many rooms in the house, from the scullery to bedrooms—no sign of Agnes Lamola.

He was sitting forlornly on a bed in a bedroom allotted to him upon their visit when he looked out the window and saw the premier arriving in one of his cars, a police vehicle trailing it. The blood on Regis' clothes and hands spoke of murder; therefore the first thought when it dawned on him that he had committed a felony was to flee. But reconsidering, he stood his ground. He had been in love before, as a cheat craving sex, until he met Agnes and they clicked like the opposite faces of magnets.

How on earth could he possibly have attacked Agnes, his darling? He couldn't imagine slapping her on the cheek, worse still assaulting her to the point of drawing so much blood. Except some endearments he murmured to her when the party began, he had no

recollection of what transpired between the time he started to get seriously drunk and woke up in the tub.

Of the opinion that if he had done something terrible to his sweetheart, then he had to atone for his guilt in prison or under a guillotine, whatever it took to appease the law, he rose and decided to meet his uncle and the police outside the bedroom. For the sake of Agnes it had to be put on record that he never attempted to flee. In court he would speak nothing but the truth and plead drunkenness. Judges and their assessors were learned men; someone was bound to understand and exonerate him.

He was crossing the lounge for the main door when it occurred to him that if all the blood on him, the carpet and the walls was Agnes' then she was dead. No one could lose so many pints and survive. The doors burst open and his uncle grimly ushered four policemen with drawn pistols.

"Don't move!" one of them commanded as they pointed the weapons on him.

His predicament neither looked nor felt real. For a while he thought he was a confused actor on a movie set. But there was no filming crew; therefore he complied with the order, raising his hands over his head and standing still. "What did I do? Someone must tell me."

"Regis Makgunda," the police officer barked, "you're under arrest for inflicting grievous bodily harm! You've the right to remain silent."

"What did I do? Where's Agnes?" He looked at his uncle.

"You attacked her with a knife," the premier said angrily, standing by the door.

"What went wrong, Uncle?"

"You accused her of two-timing," the premier added. "No one could restrain you, Regis. Is that why you brought her here, to kill her in my house? Pray that she lives or you're a goner."

"The charge might be altered to murder if she dies!" the policeman said. "Lie down slowly and remain still!"

When he was on the floor, sniffing a blotch of Agnes' blood under his nose, they rushed on him, pinned him down like a piñata, searched and handcuffed him.

Regis didn't want to recall the next six months he spent in remand prison, the squalor, the beatings and verbal abuse from guards, sodomy perpetrated on him, the pain of watching fellow inmates succumbing to illnesses, the rejection from friends and family members. Yet he had endured everything and survived. Instead, he recalled the happiness he felt three weeks after his incarceration when he learnt that Agnes was making steady recovery in hospital, which meant he wouldn't be charged with murder and the State would soon present her before the court for her evidence-in-chief. He looked forward to his exoneration.

After a month and a half of repeated remands in prison without the victim appearing in court due to her hospitalisation, Agnes was finally wheeled into the courtroom by a police officer and her father. Her legs were in plasters. A sling held her right arm. Under her larynx were several stitches. The miniskirt and top she wore on the tragic day were spread on the evidence desk, quietly speaking of the gore that prevailed in the premier's mansion. When she avoided looking at him, Regis knew she hated him to the extent of testifying against him. But when she looked towards the gallery, he saw that she had nothing save contempt for his uncle.

A public prosecutor told the court that she had a total of twelve stab wounds in her bosom, belly and thighs. The court heard that her attacker tried to slit open her neck, that both of her femurs snapped in the attack, and that he would prove that the defendant, Regis Makgunda, the sole accused, was responsible for her injuries, and the prosecution team had seven witnesses to back its claim. Immediately, he successfully applied to the court to alter the charge from GBH to attempted murder.

Sweat beads stood on Regis face as he pleaded not guilty. On being asked to present his defence outline, he stammered and talked about his love for his girlfriend, which the prosecution objected as irrelevant. The judge sustained the objection. The court heard how they feasted and how he partook of vodka and woke up in the tub with Agnes' panties in his left hand.

When the prosecutor asked Agnes to take the stand, she refused to question Regis or give her own account, which vexed the

proceedings. The prosecutor vainly tried to coerce and coax the plaintiff into talking. She glanced at Regis, then at his uncle, and turned away from the prosecutor. Eventually, he declared that the victim had turned hostile and applied for adjournment. In the next four months, which brought his remand incarceration to six months, Regis wallowed in prison and Agnes refused to budge. His father died mysterious while he was behind bars, a victim of the wave of death afflicting the Makgundas for a decade and a half at the time.

The judge assigned three government psychiatrists to assess Agnes' state of mind and persuade her to talk, but it was in vain. Their reports stated that she was sane and within her faculties and that it was by choice that she didn't want to speak about what happened. They further revealed to their principal that Agnes Lamola had made it known to them that she had no intention of talking about the matter at the time and in the future, and perceived their efforts as harassment. The prosecution's case undermined, the court dismissed the docket and said the prosecution would proceed by way of summons if it so desired in future, and discharged Regis.

Agnes refused to see or speak to him. Her family barred him from ever setting foot in their yard. Her father threatened to disembowel Regis if he dared. South African newspapers carried the story of the hazy case underpinning that the premier's nephew attempted to murder his girlfriend in Hon. Moagi Makgunda's Randlord Mansion.

Some editors went on to suggest on their opinion pages that Regis was possibly hired by rival politicians within the African National Congress (ANC) to tarnish the premier's philanthropic reputation. A few argued that Agnes' attack was a botched attempt by the premier and his nephew to kill her for ritualistic purposes to enhance his business ventures and standing in the Party. Through the articles of his official spokesman and media liaison officers responsible for his image, the premier subtly sided with most of the theorists besmearing Regis.

Regis' family and relations, including Moagi Makgunda, shunned him, which became the onset of his ordeal. As he drifted into vagrancy, initially soliciting overnight accommodation from friends

and former classmates, his mother died in a horrific and queer car accident in Mamelodi. A getaway vehicle some heist robbers were fleeing the police in veered off the road. It ploughed into their house through the sitting room and rammed into the kitchen in which she was peeling potatoes. The low-cost house crumbled on the car. The vehicle caught fire and gutted the rubble, burning his mother to ashes. His parents died within three months of the other's death.

Regis didn't want to think about the past. Without wincing, he drank from the bottle of vodka and tried to bring his mind to the present, to the hollow morning. His parents were dead, so were all his siblings except the lastborn, Katlego. The boy was fifteen years old, still Catholic despite everything and now staying with a maternal uncle in Soshanguve Township. His other uncle, Lebokang Makgunda, was wasted and battling for his life in Steve Biko Academy Hospital. When he met his young brother a few days ago in Church Square, Katlego told him nothing was looking up and it was a matter of time before Lebokang died.

Moagi funded all the funerals in the family, never grumbling, never moved enough to fathom the root cause of the deaths if it didn't emanate from him. From his Olympian heights, it seemed the premier couldn't look outside the exigencies of his premiership. If he, Regis, was innocent of attacking Agnes and only one man knew he was, that man would be Moagi Makgunda. If he were innocent and his uncle knew it, the man had to know her attacker if the premier had fabricated the two-timing allegation.

God, he thought. Take pity on Uncle Lebokang and damn the premier.

Regis gulped the vodka and thought about the future. He understood that if the death bedevilling the family didn't claim him, any of the lifestyle illnesses killing the vagrants of Pretoria would.

But what his father began telling him when he was on the threshold of adulthood dispelled all the disturbing recollections constantly plaguing him. That when he was seven and the family hired a *sangoma* to cleanse them of suspected evil spirits, a custom of many Pedi families, the diviner said Regis had a messianic and sacred duty to carry out in his adulthood to salvage the Makgundas. His late

father had written down verbatim the words of the *sangoma*. The piece of paper was somewhere in his bag.

Chapter 5

“Aren’t the children joining us?” Moagi asked his wife. Katherine shook her head. “They’d noodles and prawns an hour ago. But Eunice and Eurydice may be drifting towards anorexia.”

“What makes you say so?”

“The girls’ appetite is getting poorer by the day. At the table they often gag.”

“Maybe we need to change the cooks.”

“The chefs’ dishes are first-grade, Moagi.”

He pondered for a moment. “You’re the mother and should know better, I guess. The girls could be exhibiting adolescence and puberty signs. Eunice and Eurydice are growing up.”

“And Eurydice takes long in the bathroom.”

“Is it bad for a teenage girl to bath thoroughly, Katy?”

“She might be masturbating.”

He laughed, but it disappointed him that the laughter came out as a wicked cackle. “Leave the girls alone, sweetheart. And stop worrying about non-existent things.”

It was a breezy Saturday. Birds of varying colours, presumably from the nature reserve, fretted joyously and chirped in the surrounding palm trees, shrubs and flower gardens, excitedly flying to the fountain in front of the mansion for a drink.

She was in a white halter-neck dress with sequins. He was in a striped golf T-shirt, khaki cargo shorts and sandals. The couple lunched al fresco on tiger fish, deep-fried marinated prawns and chips. A bottle of *Johannisberger*, an imported wine from Germany, stood on a table under a gazebo near the swimming pool. Among the dishes were their Blackberries and a pair of binoculars. The scent of flowers languorously wafted towards them.

“It’s romantic, Katy. I never thought I’d lead this life. I was raised to believe a man must lack and suffer... that there was no placid place under the sun except in Heaven. I think we’re happier than angels.”

“The Devil is a liar, Moagi.”

“People who believe in crossing the Red Sea on a daily basis suffer terribly. Those who understand that the crucifixion and resurrection paved a passage for believers eat the fruits of the land. Then of course we’ve those meant to live in squalor to enable the rich to see the essence of their wealth.”

Katherine eyed him with doubt. “I thought everyone could choose between poverty and wealth.”

“If it were so Jesus wouldn’t have spoken in parables. Some people aren’t meant to understand the gospel. Some women are geisha-pretty while others are piranha-ugly, that’s how bad it is, Katy.”

She stopped eating. “Which category am I? Be honest, Moagi.”

“If you’d lived in the days of Solomon you would’ve been a queen or in his concubine harem. The three cherubim you gave birth to confirm your beauty.”

Her brow contorted. “Did you marry me for something that fades?”

He knew she was playacting. “I married you for your beauty and aptitude. I was poor, but you saw that we’d rise from the dirt. You believed in my determination. I believed you were the virtuous woman God set aside for me.”

“How often do you think about me in a day?”

A pearl of laughter escaped his lips. “Inapplicable is the honest answer. You overshadow my thoughts. Your face is ever clouding my view. Among women I turn into a millipede.”

The furrows on her brow vanished. She sighed. “You’re as charming as ever. I’m proud of you. I never saw you with a girlfriend, or heard you were dating a woman. I’m blessed among women.”

“Point of correction,” he said seriously. “I didn’t date any man either.”

Both laughed.

They ate in silence; Moagi watching Katherine and the playful birds in the trees behind her, she watching his face in a portrait featuring a background of the dark Magaliesberg, the range of mountains, behind him. The range brought Pretoria storms.

He thought that beauty-wise she was a pale shadow of her former self, an expression he couldn't mouth, or she would be cross with him and suppose he was adulterous. Two years her senior, slightly overweight and unconcerned with jogging or any physical exercises, she had seemingly overgrown him in age by about five years. Nothing satisfied her save travelling abroad, fattening her business account, making public appearances with him and monopolising him. By virtue of being the pampered wife of a billionaire and a premier, she was contented with living in his never-ending reflected light.

"Lebokang is in bad shape," she said. "I didn't like what I saw this morning. He's like a cat crashed to a crepe yet stubbornly alive."

"Death shall come as a relief to him. Life has a very vengeful irony; when one desires death, it chases death away, when one desires life, death comes running. But Lebokang, though it may sound evil, must die now or his state will continue to torture the nurses and everyone who visits him."

"These days I'm praying for two things. I want God to restore him immediately or take his life with the same speed."

"All of us have mourned him several times. Just don't take the children when you visit him. I don't want them to see him dying."

"He has been bed-ridden for a month and half now. It baffles me the illness hasn't been diagnosed."

"I don't think every disease can be diagnosed."

"But there's a terrible trend if you've noticed. Every year we lose one or two Makgundas to freak accidents and inexplicable illnesses. Close relatives are living in squalor."

He looked at her, ruffled. "What're you suggesting, Katy? Have you spoken to Lerato lately?"

"It's an honest observation, Moagi. Relatives are whispering. We're under suspicion."

"What do they suspect us of, Katy?"

"They assume we're using terrible juju to advance ourselves."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Lerato told me in my face that I was evil. She has joined camp with our enemies and detractors. Last week, when you were in Dubai, she threw out the window the money I gave her. Banknotes rained from the ninth floor of Steve Biko."

"You didn't tell me about the incident."

"I thought you'd overreact."

"Why did she throw the money? Did you've an altercation?"

"Stress is beginning to breach her senses. She thinks I'm into juju, yet I found a *sangoma* leaving my brother's room. The man wore beads and cowries. When I got inside, the room smelled of burnt herbs."

Katherine briefly shut her eyes thoughtfully. "Lerato is in a fix. I don't know what I'd do if I found myself in her situation."

"*Take your money, Moagi!* That's what she shouted out the window before she threw the money. But she wasn't done yet. *I've no need for ill-gotten money!*" He relived the moment, grounding his teeth and breathing heavily.

"Didn't it create a scene?"

"I parted with a large sum of money to gag journalists."

"Forgive her. She didn't know what she was doing."

"I forgave her that very moment." He smiled. "It's neither Christian nor healthy to keep grudges. Half of my brother's body is in a grave. He's now attracting greenflies. I don't suppose it's reasonable to hate a widow in the making."

"You sound like you're decreeing his death."

"It's nothing but the truth, Katherine."

"But still there might be a spell bedevilling the extended family. At times I think you and my children are in danger. I wish Father Van Vuuren would perform a cleansing Mass in our house and burn incense in every room."

He laughed. "Father Hendrik van Vuuren is an Afrikaner who won't understand your fears." He held her hand across the table. "God will deliver us from the snare of any fowler."

"You think the priest can't help us?"

"The Church ordains priests for absolution, confession and Mass. Father Van Vuuren would find our concerns not only

phantasmagorical but stupid and insane. We wouldn't want to parade ourselves before him as foolish pagans when we're Catholic and protected to the fingernails."

"But why would Lerato consider you evil? It worries me, Moagi."

"I'm not a vegetative housewife; therefore I don't understand her mindset. I nearly lost face in the fuss. Never-do-wells always blame their failures on others."

With her hand, she covered his clutching hers. "I'm sorry. Are you angry with your sister-in-law?"

"I don't smile at people who try to smear my image."

"I thought you said you forgave her."

"Lerato mustn't toy with the tail of a tiger even when the predator is in play mode."

They disentangled their hands and reached for their wine glasses at the same time.

The sound of hooves alerted them of the advent of sprinting horses. Eunice and Eurydice, thirteen and eighteen years respectively, rode abreast of the other near them. The girls, saddled on thoroughbred chestnut mares, rode like chevaliers, their hair flaring.

Clad in buff leather jodhpurs, denim bootlegs secured with leather bowyangs that matched the jodhpurs, and black leather jackets, curled cowboy hats bobbing against their shoulder blades, they appeared like time-travellers from the American Wild West era. Both waved and screamed at their parents. Moagi and Katherine waved at them and smiled.

"They ride like desert pirates," Katherine observed, cringing at the speed and watching them diminish along a tarred driveway leading to the hangar in the distance.

The girls yelled like cowboys until they were out of sight on the other side of a cluster of trees. A moment later Hicks, the family's ornamental French poodle, ran past the gazebo in pursuit of the girls. The couple laughed at the dog's pathetic effort to catch up with the horses.

"Give them bowie-knives, ropes and skin bottles, they'll ride across the Atlantic to the Great Canyon in the United States."

“Those mares are mean-tempered brutes. I wonder how they mount them.”

“The two are in their natural elements on horseback, especially Eunice. She’s more comfortable in a saddle than on a hammock.” He smelled his wine like a professional wine taster and sipped it. “The girls are Caesars—conquerors. If I knew someone in the Australian Outback I’d send them there to experience stockyard droving and see if they can conquer the dust-devils, the hellish heat and the plaguing flies of the Outback. Where’s Eula? Doesn’t she want a share of the fun?”

“Eula is a tartar, a modern lady. She isn’t into sitting astride horses. I want her to keep her knees together until she graduates at Oxford or Harvard.”

“I know she likes flowers, the violin and the fish in the fountain, but an occasional ride is a good exercise, besides, it’s also lady-like to ride. The girl is only eleven. Girls her age ought to play hard.”

“Not in a city in the twenty-first century. Can’t you see that Eurydice and Eunice are skinheads in children’s bodies?”

Both laughed again. He picked the pair of binoculars and trained them on the mansion’s first floor, peering from window to window until he saw Eula. She was by the window of the floor’s staircase landing, pitched on a stool and playing a violin dwarfing her. In a furled and frisson white dress, her hair parted in the middle, curled and flaring to her shoulders, but not cascading to them, she was both chubby and cute.

“I can see her, Katy.” He said, looking through the gadget. “She’s playing the violin at her new favourite spot on the landing. I guess she’s playing us a romantic tune. It’s unfortunate we can’t hear a thing. Eula will become a world champion violinist and unseat title holders in Vienna and Argentina.”

“I hope so, Moagi. While our little angel makes a name for herself, Eurydice and Eunice can become outlaws in the deserts of Nevada and Arizona.”

“You worry too much about something they’ll grow out of very soon.” He put down the binoculars.

“I’ve my reservations about girls sitting astride horses,” she said wryly. “Girls must always sit with their knees together. The cherry is a precious, delicate thing.”

He made a half-strangled laugh and said nothing, but studied her countenance. Was the build-up of her statements a subtle warning?

“You’re staring at me, Moagi.”

“I’m admiring you, sweetheart.”

She beamed with contentment.

Minutes later, when a maid brought them dessert, crepes and éclair, and left, Eula came out of the house, waved at them and negotiated her way through half a dozen peacocks and a full grown, blue-headed turkey-cock loitering around the fountain. She carried a packet of aquatic fodder. The fowls weren’t perturbed by her presence; in fact two peacocks trailed her for a moment while the rest took no notice of her, it seemed.

In her white short dress with many folds and frills, she was beautiful under the azure dome, especially when she stood by the imposing fountain, her skin ebony and velvet, and cast the feed into it. She played with the water, leaning into the fountain and scooping it. The girl preferred the violin and the fountain to anything else.

In the next minutes, the couple discussed their livelihood in earnest; their string of supermarkets in Cape Town and Pretoria, their medium-scale gold mine in Johannesburg, their orphanage for albinos near their rural home in the Limpopo Province, and their various projects aimed at ploughing back into the communities they were doing business.

A scream from the direction of the fountain, Eula’s, drew their attention suddenly and brought them to their feet. The girl continued to scream, her cries desperate. At first Moagi didn’t understand what was happening though he saw clearly that the solitary gobbler was on her daughter’s lower back, its beak gripping the hair on the back of her head, its hind part pressed against her fundament. The weight of the turkey pinned the child’s bosom against the knee-high rim of the fountain.

Astounded, the couple ran to her, Moagi armed with the wine bottle nearly empty, Katherine picking a rake along the way. But

when both were within striking distance the turkey panicked and flew away noisily, vanishing behind the house. The peacocks scuttled away in panic too.

Katherine dropped the rake, held her daughter and looked her up and down, too awed to speak for a while. Eula was so shaken that her teeth were chattering. "Are you okay, Eula?" She finally asked.

The child nodded and began to cry clutching her mother's dress.

"Did you see it?" She turned to her husband. "It tried to mate with her!"

"That's not typical of male turkeys. It's sick in the head!"

Katherine carried the child against her hip. "Are you sure you're okay, darling?" She asked the child again.

The child crooned, still clutching her mother's clothes. "I'm scared, Mummy. Why did it jump on me like that?"

She looked at Moagi bitterly, but said to the child: "It was playing with you. Forget it, Eula. It made a mistake." But the fear she saw in her child's eyes drove her to tears.

Moagi sighed and ruffled his hair.

Eula touched the seat of her dress and showed her a wet palm. "It sprayed me with this. Is it its spittle?"

"Forget it, Eula. It won't happen again, sweetie." She stared at her husband, worry and bafflement mirrored on her face. "That's semen, Moagi. What's happening?"

"I can't know everything. I'm as puzzled as you are."

"We need the intervention of Father Van Vuuren," she declared, tears mottling the make-up on her face.

"Father Van Vuuren will laugh at us. This is just an unfortunate incident. Let's not be fussy until we're sure we need special rituals performed here."

"Are you suggesting we wait for actual bestiality to happen before we can take action?"

"Don't talk like that, honey, you scare the child." He looked at his daughter. "Go and take a bath, Eula. It's alright now. It won't happen again. The stockman will kill it. Smile and wipe your tears, please."

The girl wiped her tears, but she was too shocked and sullen to smile.

“Put her down, honey. She might feel vulnerable for as long as you mollycoddle her. Go to your room, Eula, and do what I said.”

Katherine patted and put her down. As the child walked towards the house, the couple looked up and saw the butler and three maids standing in the main doorway, drawn by the child’s screams. The workers wordlessly retreated into the house when the couple glanced at them.

A crestfallen Eula was two paces from the threshold when the turkey came running towards her. Katherine screamed, pointing at the fowl and holding her head helplessly. Moagi threw the bottle at the gobbler and hit it in the wing before it reached their daughter. The bird quaked in fright and pain, half-flying sideward, half-hauled by the impact, its wings flapping noisily. It slumped against the wall, but only for a while.

Katherine ran to their screaming daughter now too petrified to move. The butler and the maids appeared in the doorway again.

“Fetch a pistol, Divine!” Moagi shouted at the butler, his eyes on the turkey to avoid losing it again. “Hurry!”

The dwarf disappeared into the house.

The bird trotted away from the house towards a garden of bougainvillea, azaleas and daffodils. It composed and went about picking insects and particles on the edge of the bed. Katherine, who was looking at it too, quickly led Eula into the house, the maids standing aside to let her pass. Many questions were on their faces, but they wouldn’t dare question their employers.

Moagi never took his eyes from the fowl. When the butler handed him a .45 Colt, he cocked it immediately and stepped towards the bird, a finger curled around the trigger. When he was about ten metres from the turkey, he held the pistol with both hands and fired several times.

The gobbler quaked and bolted into the flower garden, but it was bloodied in four places. He fired again, shattering its head. It fell among peons, white and red roses, and stretched its legs stiffly. Relieved, he sighed loudly and cursed silently, but remained poised to

fire again in case by some miracle it rose. The bird lay still, the pistol muzzle smoking.

Two drill-clad men armed with rifles appeared running from two directions, attracted by the gunfire. "What is it, sir? Is everything okay?" One asked as they approached him cautiously from opposite sides.

"It's under control now. This turkey tried to tarantella with Eula."

The two men stopped in their tracks, puzzled. He saw that they wished him to explain. It wasn't their business to know the goings-on in his property; therefore he wasn't obliged to demystify his statement.

"You can go to your posts."

"Yessar." The second man answered, straining to see the dead bird.

A walkie-talkie strapped on the shoulder of one of the men croaked into life. "*Mike Two, Mike One, this is Alpha Control,*" a voice said on the radio. "*What's the meaning of the gunshots? Over.*"

"Alpha Control," the guard said into the walkie-talkie, "This is Mike Two. Big Brother put down a fowl. Everything under control. I repeat: everything under control."

Ten minutes later, a gardener had hosed the flowers of blood and taken the turkey to his quarters, the two security personnel had resumed their concealed positions in the trees and the maids were back at their work. Katherine and Eula were still in the house. Moagi sat by himself in the gazebo, the Colt in front of him on the table.

He was staring at the water in the pool and trying to understand the occurrence, when he heard Eunice's frantic screams coming from the direction of the hangar. She was midway between the hangar and the mansion. He picked the pistol and ran towards her, cocking it again and wondering if he wasn't a character in a nightmare.

"Run, Daddy!" Eunice shouted.

"What is it?" he asked as he ran towards her.

"A mare is trying to attack Eurydice! Run!"

Eunice turned and began running in the direction she came from. Moagi caught up with her, so did the two armed men, but the details

outran the father and his daughter. On breaking from an enclave of southern trees, they all saw a mare neighing, braying and chasing Eurydice round a solitary palm tree. Yelling for help, she fell and rose before the animal reached her. Eurydice changed directions like a hare of the chase. Hicks, the French poodle, barked at the horse from a safe distance.

The two men ran and stopped between the horse and the teenager and tried to scare the mare away with gestures and orders. The mare reared on its hind legs and sought to go round them, its nostrils flaring, its organ distended and pendulous. The braying and neighing continued unabated as it tried to circumvent the men.

“Shoot him!” The premier ordered from a distance, his arm around Eunice; both father and daughter transfixed and panting.

One of the guards shot it in the head at close range. The mare leapt into the air and, kicking, lay dying. Eurydice ran to his father, hugged him and cried, her tears wetting his shirt and chest.

“What happened?” he asked her, his unarmed hand squeezing her shoulders. “A few minutes ago you were on the mare.”

At eighteen, a Grade 12 student dreaming of enrolling at a European university in the coming year, she was an adult and looked it, yet she cried like a kindergarten girl. “I dismounted and it came for me, Daddy.”

“How, Eurydice? Are you playing dirty games with horses?”

“He sniffed my bottom, Daddy.” Like Eunice, she clung to her father.

“Where’s your horse, Eunice?”

“He galloped to the stables, Daddy.”

He nodded. “Take it easy, you’re a big girl now. The horse is dead now.” He looked up and shouted at the security men. “Every fowl and animal must be locked away until further notice! Convey the order to the stockman!”

“Yessar!” they answered in unison.

The men’s walkie-talkies crackled again. “*Mike One, this is Alpha Control. Explain the rifle fire.*”

“Alpha Control,” the second man said to the radio, “Mike One speaking. Big Brother ordered a distressed horse put down. Do you copy?”

“Good copy, Mike One. I’m sending someone down there to verify. Over and out.”

Moagi turned and stirred his daughters towards the house, all the way assuring them that everything was under control. But inwardly he wondered what was happening, but thought he wasn’t being truthful to himself.

These acts of attempted bestiality were omens. The early warning signs spoke of looming catastrophe. If he took long to put in place barriers and countermeasures, something unpronounceable was in the offing. He felt it in the air and in his bones. He wished the white girl André Giovanni Puccini, the Sicilian, deluded for him in France would land as soon as possible.

Chapter 6

Lousy stings around his waistline, in his groin and the cleavage in his fundament woke Regis around nine o'clock of the following day. He awoke to ponder a bleak future, scrap a living and attempt to gather the vestiges of his old life. Poverty had turned him into a simpleton of predictable routine.

He was in his usual spot in Burgers Park and reeked of vodka and spirits, items that had consumed all the money he made from picking pieces of aluminium, iron and copper and empty bottles, and carting them in sorted loads to recycling dealers outside Central Pretoria. Not only was it backbreaking work that taxed him to his bones, but it was degrading and damaging to the remnants of his self-esteem.

After briefly staring at the sky and reading an impending storm in the clouds, he sat up and did a quick inventory. The cart and his bag were by his side. Of course he had removed the former's wheels to immobilise it and discourage thieves, often fellow vagrants, from stealing the backbone of his livelihood. The wheels were hidden in different locations near his 'bedroom'.

Basalt busts of the city's founding fathers, dilapidated caryatids carrying cracked vases on the heads, spun in his sight due to a severe hangover. Whenever he could help it, he usually left a little vodka or spirit for a gulp or two in the morning. But it appeared he had emptied all the bottles he bought the previous day; at least that was what the burning sensation in his chest and the three bottles at his feet silently suggested.

Regis cursed himself and raked his logged hair. Having taken a bath two weeks previously and last brushed his teeth properly over two years ago, he was aware of the grime on him. Scrapping a living in Pretoria, imbibing vodka, scratching every square inch on his body, swearing and cursing members of the public who stared at him wasn't an easy occupation.

Despite his shortcomings, he desired to lead a normal life like the rest of his peers. His definition for normalcy was to settle down through marriage, start a family and being counted as a responsible tax-paying citizen of Mzansi–South Africa. Instead of scrap metal and bottles, he would like to cart his baby in a prim while strolling with his wife, and visit the tourist resorts of the country.

Ever since his childhood, he had always dreamt of a gloriously future and living large. Then he visited his uncle two and a half years ago, a visit that brought a dramatic turn into his life. The need to fathom exactly what transpired when he was in the vagaries of drunkenness at Randlord Mansion haunted him relentlessly.

The period from his blackout to the time he awakened hours later in the bathtub was a grey interval he died to demystify. Was it possible that he accused his sweetheart of two-timing him and became violent? He couldn't even remember ever accusing her of such. But as someone who had had too much to drink he couldn't say with certainty that he had behaved himself on the day.

In his mind, he raised many questions than he could answer and wished he could establish rapport with Agnes. At least she was sober and saw what happened to her. She had the moral obligation to exonerate him if she so wished. But his former lover was married and bitter with him. The husband was a terrible rage and didn't want to see Regis. On one hand, he took it the husband was bent on deterring them from meeting in case they mended their differences and rekindled their affair; on the other, he supposed the husband assumed he was a maniac and chose to be protective of his wife.

Despite the barriers, Regis hoped that someday he would learn the truth and sincerely apologise if indeed he attacked her; not because he wanted Agnes back in his life, but it was decent and civilised. The worst thing he avoided was approaching her in rags and dirt as a pale shadow of the shadow of his former self. When they last stumbled on each other at the corner of Skinner and Bosman St as he was systematically moving from one refuse bin to the other in search of bottles, she fled screaming as if she had encountered a monster.

Though Agnes now saw him as something worse than a deadly contagious disease, he believed the premier was the author of his

misfortune and the deaths plaguing the extended family. From an obscure shop owner in Mamelodi high-density suburb, Moagi Makgunda had mysteriously risen to become a business mogul and a distinguished politician. He suspected the businessman delved in witchcraft and juju that turned relatives into misers or killed them, yet Regis could do nothing about it. The laws of the country were grave silent on witchcraft. If he confronted his uncle he was likely to wind up in jail for defamation of character.

He had justification to hate his uncle. Though Moagi was perceivably known to be generous, he couldn't approach him for help. It would be a betrayal of his dead father's spirit. Even if he decided to visit the premier at his home or office at the Gauteng Provincial Government Building in Johannesburg, poverty and dirt manacled him. How could a soiled vagrant like him enter and stand in the provisional offices? The shame he would bring on the premier wasn't his worry, but the politician's abhorrence of being associated with him. Regis could choose a deictic confrontation, but if he won the argument, would that turn the premier from his wicked ways?

Pride was one thing, but he feared his uncle and thought him a Satanist. One of them was on the windward while the other was on the leeward side, like two creatures of the same species that had evolved so differently over the years that one had become a predator to the other. How could he not think of Moagi Makgunda as predatory when he showed no remorse over his misery and the deaths in the family? Whenever a relative died, the premier bought expensive caskets and limitlessly funded the funerals.

Looking at the vistas of the city's buildings, he wished he were dead or madness would come into him. Death would bring the final curtain to his wasted life, while lunacy would be a veil against shame. From the age of seven he had thought himself gifted and favoured of God and the spirits. Twenty years ago when he was in Grade One, a diviner pointed out that he would deliver the family.

However, though the diviner was a man of brevity, the family and he became kaleidoscopic about the future, seeing Regis as a spiritual hero who would turn all the members into business or academic luminaries. Either the diviner had lied or some notorious character,

most likely his uncle, bewitched and dispossessed him of his blessings. Regis didn't understand how a man of his education and calibre wound up vagrant among hopeless souls from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and rural South Africa.

Through gaps in the flower bushes and ornamental constructions, he looked west. Throngs of strollers and shoppers were on the pavements of Andries St. Someone or something in the milling people caught his attention. He couldn't distinguish what it was, but it triggered a faulting memory. He swept the section of the crowd in his view and saw that it was a collared black priest walking along the street. What was it about the man of the cloth? Then he remembered he had had a strange and elaborate dream the previous night.

Chapter 7

Moagi and their Catholic priest had featured in Regis' dream, a nightmare he wanted out of his memory bank. The dream came back to him:

They were in the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Sacred Heart at the corner of Skinner and Bosman St. Father Hendrik van Vuuren was conducting requiem Mass because he, Regis, was dead and in a casket with a Judas window through which he could see the priest and follow proceedings though his eyes were fixed and staring. But his hearing was as acerbic as that of a jackal on the brink of starvation.

The priest, devilish in requiem vestments; an alb without laces and a black chasuble, and everyone, was convinced he was dead. He knew they thought him dead because he was in the casket. But his heart was beating and he could still see and hear despite his body being cold and numb from rigor mortis. He took it he had laid in a mortuary for quite some time and confinement in freezing temperatures had deadened the rest of his senses.

How could he catch the priest's attention? His eyes couldn't move and he couldn't stir. He just had to do something or he would be buried alive. In magazines, he had read many stories of unfortunate people who were entombed alive and died later from hunger and suffocation. Upon exhumation for one reason or another, coroners saw evidence that some of the individuals had struggled in their coffins.

Summoning the intervention of God and his ancestors, he willed a surge of life to revisit his muscles and ligaments. He wanted to belch, shake or knock the side panels of the casket. Nothing happened. His only hope was at body viewing. He hoped someone was going to notice the life in his eyeballs. Waiting became a period of anxiety and fear. He saw the folly of being a sheep in the fold of a spiritually blind shepherd. Had Father Hendrik van Vuuren been ordained of God, the Giver of gifts that edified the Church, he could've seen that the congregant was alive. Now, since he was devoid of the ability to differentiate between life and death as evidenced by his conducting requiem Mass for a living being desperate to

be rescued, it explained why many people in the church were poor, ill, widowed, jobless and stagnate in many aspects. The reason was simple—Father Van Vuuren was a priest by profession, not calling, a man ordained by other men, not God.

The priest was speaking in a sangfroid voice. “Regis was a man of poetry, poetic antics and polemics.” He looked at Regis through the Judas window. “Behold the Ark of the Covenant. The Holy of Holies is on your breast, Brother Regis Makgunda. You’re dead and better so, for it is the will of God. The same will when it was spoken in the beginning brought the universe into existence. The same wrung light from darkness and water from a rock. We wouldn’t have wanted you to come to this, but who’re we before the Holy of Holies? We’re specs of dust.” He crossed himself, moved his frail hand in blessing and said in Latin: “*Dominus vobiscum.*”

The mourners responded, “*Et cum spiritu tuo!*”

“*Fratres, agnoscamus peccata nostra, ut apti simus ad sacra mysteria celebranda.*”

The priest’s voice was raised to the mourners. Regis knew the man of the cloth was being histrionic for his daily bread, to impress the hundreds in attendance. He stared at him, hopeful and expectant.

Notice the glint in my eyes, Father Van Vuuren, he thought, or the dilation of the pupils.

“I’m not gifted to raise the dead, Regis; otherwise, like Lazarus, I would’ve raised you before you were brought in here. But who knows what is good for Man? Hezekiah pleaded with the Lord to sway Death from him. God granted him more years, but his extended life was profane in the eyes the Lord. Brother Regis Makgunda, I pray that you choose to remain dead and be content with death; it is what the good Lord has decided as your fate. Now you’re in the realm of eternal peace.”

Regis hadn’t been a pious man before Man and God. In lies, fornication, hatred and petty thieving he had lived his life. The fear of the sulphur, brimstone and the flames of Hell invigorated Regis’ determination to rise from the casket. He willed himself to shed tears for the priest to notice, but nothing came out of his eyes. Blinking was out of the question; his face had the rigidity of a rock. There was no perception in his nose; otherwise he would’ve sneezed from the incense. Perhaps the incense was as phoney as the priest.

"In nomine Patris," Father van Vuuren resorted to Latin as he went around the casket spreading incense from an urn, "et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti."

"Amen!" the mourners answered in unison.

"Gratia Domini nostril Jesu Christi, et caritas Dei, et communication Sancti Spritus sit cum omnibus vobis..."

After body viewing, when the Makgundas, the Mafus, the Mokoenas, the Ndlovus, the Kunenes, the Mhlangas and everybody had solemnly filed past him, his hope faded.

Pall bearers loaded the casket into a hearse, which took him to a gravesite on the fringes of Mamelodi suburb. More requiem rites, the prelude to burial, followed. That was the final opportunity or he would never rise from the coffin again, yet he couldn't move a muscle. A whirr and gentle vibrations warned him he was being lowered into his grave. As before, the Makgundas, the Mafus, the Mokoenas, the Ndlovus, the Kunenes, the Mhlangas and everybody filed past the grave and threw handfuls of earth onto the casket, some of the dirt landing on the Judas window, obstructing his vision. Most of the people, especially women, were in uncontrollable tears.

A chorister started a song in Pedi, which underlined that Man, animated clay, had no permanent abode on earth, and Death shouldn't be forever proud because it was prophesied that it would be conquered and cast into a lake of fire. It was then that the scriptures he had learnt in his lifetime came to the fore in him. He rebuked his own personality and the Devil; the spirit of destruction, lying and killing. Regis willed life to reinvigorate his body. He pleaded with the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead to revitalise his organs. He blinked and opened his mouth, but no one noticed; soil had completely covered the window. Sextons began shovelling earth into the grave.

Time was of the essence. With his elbows, knees and forehead, he attacked the casket relentlessly and frantically until it broke in several places. He sat up immediately, and things went haywire in the cemetery. While a good number screamed and collapsed, mourners scuttled in panic in every direction. But Father Van Vuuren and Regis' uncle, Moagi Makgunda, stood their ground and, to his disbelief, jointly pushed him back into the grave when he tried to climb out.

When he refused to give up, they attacked him with kicks, clenched fists and shovels until he was a bunch of butchered flesh too exhausted to raise a hand in defence and slumped into the grave. The priest and Moagi quickly shovelled earth

over him, but strange buoyancy kept bringing him to the top until he flashed with the earth's surface at the men's feet.

As if on cue, the two men uprooted nearby granite tombstones and were set to bash his head to pulp. The ground shook and thunder rumbled in the afternoon sky. From the disturbed graves rose two faceless apparitions in defiance of daylight. Without warning, an unforeseeable solar eclipse reduced every figure to a silhouette. Scores of albinos, all naked and zombie-like, sprang from the same graves and rallied behind the apparitions. Moagi and the priest dropped the tombstones and took to their heels. The ghostly figures approached the grave unabated.

Regis knew that justice and sagacity were unheard of in the world of ghosts. The converging figures scared him. A fornicator and a liar, he was no saint. He understood he had to run or he would be killed or harmed, and neither on earth nor in Heaven would he appeal for recourse. But he was injured and powerless to gather himself from the ground. Thrice he rose after much struggle and shaking, and thrice he slumped on the same spot. Whoever saw him from a distance would be forgiven for thinking he was a paraplegic who had had too much rum. The figures closed in. He braced himself and closed his eyes in anticipation of violence.

A pair of warm and tender hands felt his neck and wrist pulse as an ethereal perfume wafted into his nostrils. He opened his eyes. It was day. He was a crowned prince lying on a majestic couch in a lounge. Many bowing attendees surrounded him. A white bikini-clad girl was stooping over him, looking into his eyes and checking his pulse. She was tender, sensuous and young. Her skin was porcelain-smooth. A sparkle in her eyes jerked him from his sleep.

Regis made no effort to interpret the dream, which he found sarcastic and unnecessarily detailed, and didn't want to think much about it save the majestic part and the girl. But he knew that dreaming crowned and attended was likely a result of wishful thinking by a man ravaged by desperation.

Craning his neck, he looked through flowers and the park's placid constructions and saw fellow vagrants dotting the gardens. Throughout the years he had lived in the park and the streets of the city, he had never seen any vagrant rise from their desperation to re-blend with the mainstream society. Every month he saw the vagrants dying from malaria, pneumonia, yellow fever, and something like

beriberi, or a syndrome of all of them compounded with chronic skin diseases and apparent liver complications that reddened their skins and puffed their faces.

No hope existed for South Africa's paupers. Like the rest of them, Regis knew he was on a one-way journey to destruction and wouldn't live to raise a family. If people emerged from such vagrancy, he would be glad to tell his future children and grandchildren that he was once an unidentifiable bundle of human waste, an eyesore to the people of Pretoria, who rose from the quandary to claim his destiny. Such thinking was as fallacious as basing life on hope, a sure sign of fear and failure.

Suddenly it started to rain, heavy droplets hitting him on the head and shoulders. Abruptly the rain intensified into a monsoonal sheet, quarrelsome, cold and blinding. He couldn't afford to sit in the open contemplating his repulsive circumstances. After shoving his bag into a thicket of flowers, he ran across the park towards Andries St, crossed it almost recklessly, cars hooting and motorists swearing at him. By the time he reached a crowded veranda, he was soaked and shivering.

The expression on his face indifferent, he endured the glamour of the women sheltering from the rain. He desired them, yet he didn't know how to charm them. How could scum like him seduce a woman from the mainstay society? Blind people charmed the blind, too, and vagrants those in their bracket. Unfortunately all the female vagrants he knew were scruffy lunatics. Dirt on his person, he could tolerate, but to see it on a destitute woman suffocated him.

Forlorn and pungent on the veranda, he scratched himself in awkward places. People stepped away from him until he stood isolated. He felt like a disgraceful member of a subhuman species out to disgruntle a favoured populace. Despite the wide berth they left around him, the people continued to glance at him warily.

Couldn't they see that inside he was Catholic and passionate about life like many of them? Didn't they know that nothing was more damaging to a man than the feeling that he was inferior to every member of the normal public?

He moved backwards and turned to face the building's façade in an attempt to hide his embarrassment and shield himself from the dehumanising, contemptuous stares. The front was a wrought-iron balustrade with large panels of glass. The panels mirrored his pathetic image in contrast to those of the people around him. Regis scrutinised his reflection. Dark, dirty, shrivelled and hopeless, he appeared ten years older than his actual age.

Beyond his image, he saw stalls behind a winding mahogany counter and a small rope-guided queue. He was looking through open louvers into the interior of a commercial bank. Over the years, he had stared at the bank as he had many other commercial buildings around Burgers Park. A half-formulated idea striking him, he stepped back to read the bold words and a formula straddling several windows:

BINOMIAL BANK OF SOUTH AFRICA ($\Sigma BBSA^{\circledR}$)

$$(x + a)^n = \sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} x^k a^{n-k}$$

Bank with wisdom, progress and precision. Est. 2010

Chapter 8

Lerato dreamt of her husband, Lebokang Makgunda. Dreaming of him, an unassuming man who made her come first in his life, was a pleasure. A total man, hardworking, passionate about her and how his family perceived him throughout their years of marriage, Lebokang instilled a positive self-image in her.

But now he was ill and dying, which wretched her to the verge of cursing God. Whenever she visited the hospital and looked at him in bed, a rebellious voice prompted her to urge him to curse his Maker and die. But a contradictory voice reminded her of the blunderbuss wish of Job's wife.

Astonishingly she didn't dream of him struggling with illness or the vagaries of life:

He and she were celebrating their silver jubilee. The two re-enacted their traditional wedding in his rural home in Limpopo Province. She was barefoot, in beads and copper anklets. An ethnic dress and a shoulder shawl, both multi-coloured but predominantly indigo and maroon, distinguished her as a Pedi woman proud of her culture.

Lebokang was in a toga-like cloth and sandals, the material a replica of her shawl. Many villagers from far and near had turned up with gifts; cattle, sheep, goats and cash. Feasting, ululating and singing characterised the carnival atmosphere. She danced with her husband. He kissed her on the cheeks and on the lips. She was proud of him for his open display of his affection for her.

But then something woke Lerato from her sleep in the middle of the night. The reality she awoke to was that Lebokang was dying in Steve Biko Academy Hospital, and that three years ago they had a teenage son and a daughter both now dead. The son, their firstborn, was beaten to death by an angry mob at the corner of Vermeulen and Du Toit St. Loafers thought he was a foreigner on a pick-pocketing

prowl. Their daughter choked to death on a burger at a food-court in the city. Both died on their birthdays.

Though all the lights in the bedroom were off, the room wasn't in utter darkness. Light from Mamelodi's streetlamps filtered in through the room's flimsy curtains and beamed in through arched openings where the curtains sagged.

She lay still, eyes open and searching, trying to figure out what had roused her from her sleep. Was it a noise that emanated from the bedroom or outside the house? Mamelodi was a suburb infested with hardcore criminals from car hijackers to trigger-happy drug dealers. Inwardly she prayed against a visitation by a rapist or a murderous burglar. Rape was common in South Africa, especially in Pretoria and Johannesburg. Children and middle-aged women like her weren't spared. At times rapists broke into houses and ravaged children and elderly women at gunpoint.

Lerato listened, her heart pounding, but the fear fizzled when her husband clouded her thoughts once again. His condition was deteriorating by the day. Indicators showed he wasn't going to rise from the hospital bed, yet she scolded herself for the conclusion, which seemed like a prayer of death over a man she had loved and known for twenty-five years. But despite her self-condemnation, she envisioned mourners gathered at their house and Lebokang finally in a casket.

The *sangoma* had informed her that Moagi had irreversibly concluded him. He said no roots or concoctions were going to save Lebokang. It appeared the diviner suddenly saw something in his visions that terrified and warned him to leave the room in a huff. He left unceremoniously and could've literally bumped into the premier had he delayed by a few seconds.

The money the premier placed beside his brother on the deathbed flashed in her mind, further souring her heart. Though the amount was generous, judging by the thickness of the wad, it provoked her into displaying her dissatisfaction with her brother-in-law. It was not only immoral but beneath her and her vegetative husband to settle the hospital's bills with money from a confirmed wicked man exploiting left-handed generosity.

In her mind, she saw the banknotes raining on people and cars, and Moagi looking up, at first puzzled and then as an unconcerned observer. The words they exchanged in the hospital haunted her.

What if she and the *sangoma* were wrong? It was possible the seer had read in her psyche that she suspected her brother-in-law of delving into dangerous juju and had simply given her a slice of her mind. Should the future prove her wrong, she would sink on her knees and apologise to Moagi. He would find room in his heart to forgive her. Lerato despised the rebellious part of her mind that elected to see a devil in good light.

Moagi Makgunda is evil, she reflected and wished him dead. The Makgundas are plummeting into oblivion. If Lebokang dies, only Regis, Katlego and Moagi himself will be the last people in their lineage.

Katlego, Regis' fifteen-year-old brother, had so far lived for two years with a struggling maternal uncle. The schoolboy refused to move in with the premier whom he regarded as responsible for his parents' inexplicable deaths. The politician didn't express genuine eagerness to support Katlego, something many people thought he should've done at the burial of the boy's mother after she was killed in the crash and the subsequent fire that destroyed their home. All Moagi did on the occasion of the burial of the parents was thank friends, relatives and well-wishers for attending the funeral.

Regis dwelled on her mind. He was a vagabond drinking himself to death. The circumstances of his vagrancy were obscene, painful and hard to believe. The story of what happened about two and a half years ago when he brought his girlfriend to the premier's residence for introductions as told by Moagi himself seemed designed to demonise Regis.

The premier told journalists and relatives who cared to listen that his nephew and his girlfriend arrived at his Wonderboom residence beside himself with expectation and pizzazz. He welcomed the couple into his home, only for Regis to charge ruthlessly at Agnes after drinking himself into a brute. The police, analysts and a judge believed the politician, so did freelance criminologists in several newspapers. Because Agnes, the victim and chief witness, had turned

hostile in court, it was on that basis that the court was powerless to throw Regis in prison.

But what had awakened her? The interior of the house was totally silent. She listened for footsteps or any noise in the sitting room or kitchen. Utter silence prevailed. Somewhere in the streets dogs were barking and a drunk male voice punctuated the National Anthem with obscenities. Relieved and thankful to God that she had woken from what she suspected was prolonged sleeping in one posture, she was making the Sign of the Cross under the blankets when she heard hissing sounds on the bedroom's carpeted floor.

Hissing was synonymous with distressed snakes. Lerato switched on a shaded bedside lamp and set up, her eyes sweeping the floor as dim light filled the room. Two lengthy snouted cobras were on the floor a pace from the bed. Heads raised, each looked like a reflection of the other. Her eyes widened. She felt her heartbeat surge and beat against her breastbone. The serpents' hoods were inflated and both were either trying to psyche the other in a fight, or were waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

She felt her hair standing on its ends, saliva drying in her mouth, her fingers and toes numbing. How had two snakes found their way into her house and eventually her bedroom? Twice she closed her eyes hopeful that she would realise she was seeing an illusion, but found nothing hallucinatory about the snakes. She had never seen anything so menacing at close range.

An abortive scream which terminated like the quake of a duck escaped from her lips before she held her mouth. Since the cobras weren't mindful of her, she decided to sneak out of the bed to raise alarm, but her legs rubbed against something cold and lathe under the blankets. In one movement, she swept the blankets and the top sheet aside, exposing a coiled python on the bottom sheet. Its body was wrapped around its head which she couldn't see in the split-second that she stared at the peril.

She shrieked and sprang from the bed away from the cobras as the python began to uncoil. The snakes on the floor stopped threatening each other, turned and looked at her. On the bed, the python continued to unfold, but its head still concealed.

Lerato moved backwards, a part of her mind convinced this was a continuation of the wedding dream that had turned into a nightmare, yet the vividness and her perception of the danger suggested otherwise.

She was in a blue nightdress now clinging against her back from sudden localised perspiration. At the door, she turned on the lights without taking her eyes from the serpents. The inner door was ajar. Still moving backwards, she emerged into a short central passage of the four-roomed house. Her breathing was heavy and erratic, like an asthmatic struggling with a severe attack.

Light from the bedroom thinned the darkness in the passage. She continued to move backwards, her hands groping the wall for a switch of the passage's light. Her knees were on the verge of buckling, but she couldn't afford to be stricken dead or to have her ribcage squashed and breath squeezed out of her.

The moment her hands landed on the switch, she felt something hitting against the back of her head and brushing against her hair, which startled her. For a moment she stood like a goggle-eyed mannequin. Then she switched on the passage's naked bulb and turned, hoping to face an intruder and plead for her life. If the intruder wanted valuables and every rand and coin in the house, she would give him. If he had come to rape her, she would beg him to wear protection and avail herself until he tired and left the house.

Lerato stepped forward and turned sharply, only to stare at a dangling noose made from the length of a thick rope. It hung from a broken fan in the ceiling. She ran to the main door and tried the handle. The door wasn't locked and its key, which she had placed on a table in the bedroom, was in the keyhole. Emerging from the house, she ran across her yard under a starry sky to an unfenced neighbour's house, a graceless structure just like hers, and banged on the door.

Chapter 9

Half an hour later Lerato sat on a dining chair wrapped in a blanket courtesy of her neighbours standing around her in their yard. Not completely recovered from the terror and the panic, her eyes were on her house. Four flashing police vehicles, which brought about a score of police officers, and an ambulance, were parked around the house. Their red, blue and orange revolving lights were like a fresco discotheque in mute mode.

Her yard was alive with the officers and plainclothes policemen, all restless from inaction. Some paced the yard and tried to peer into the house through gaps in the curtains. If an intruder was in the house, thought Lerato, he could see that there was no escape for him and might hang himself with the noose in the passage, or he would go to jail for housebreaking, intimidation and attempted murder, which was what a sergeant in charge of the deployment had told her.

In a cautionary move, the sergeant made sure no one, including the officers and detectives, entered the house. Snakes, especially agitated cobras, could find several hiding places in a simple house. About fifty curious onlookers, some in pyjamas and bathroom robes, stood outside the police's yellow tape condoning the house.

All the incriminating evidence against the intruder—the two snouted cobras, the python and the noose—were in the house. But who could it be? What was his motive? Did someone really wish her dead or simply wanted to scare her stiff? It terrified her that while she worried herself insane about her husband's illness, someone was plotting against her.

Not long after, a bearded Indian man she guessed was Sikh from his black headscarf neatly wound in a cone on his head, buffalo-horn moustache, flowery waistcoat and a loose, long-sleeved shirt flapping in the wind, and a white napkin brushing against his ankles and shin-high sandals, arrived in a hearse-like car. His eyes were peering and he was very tall and thin.

“The haematologist is here now,” the sergeant announced, stepping forward to meet the Indian. The arrival took out two reed baskets from the backseat of his vehicle. “He’ll lead under my command until all the snakes are captured!”

As the sergeant debriefed the haematologist, some police officers drew their pistols in preparation for action. While the sergeant apprised the Indian, Lerato saw the officer pointing at her and her house and sticking out three emphatic fingers in the specialist’s face. The Indian walked towards the main door of the house, placed the two baskets on the threshold and entered the house without the slightest hesitation, four officers at his heels.

Lerato shifted her weight on the chair and waited. She expected to hear gunshots in the house, but no disturbance ensued. Twenty minutes later the Indian and the four officers stepped outside. Lerato jumped to her feet. The four had tucked their weapons in their holsters and were as empty-handed as the Indian.

“No snakes in the house,” she heard the haematologist announcing to the sergeant. The specialist had the disappointment of a man unnecessarily roused from his sleep in the middle of the night.

“You didn’t look everywhere!” Lerato shouted.

He snarled at her. “I was called to catch snakes, ma’am. Nothing in your house looks like a snake or a reptile for that matter. Go check for yourself if you think I did shoddy work.”

She pointed at her eyes. “I saw the snakes, sir!”

“I don’t know about that,” he said curtly. “There aren’t snakes in your house but cockroaches. You need a pest controller, not a haematologist.”

Confused, the sergeant looked at her and then at the Indian. He turned to the four policemen. “What about the noose?”

“Sir,” one of the four answered, “there’s no noose in the house. We searched every room. We moved furniture.”

“I’m not a psychologist, but there’re chances the lady was seeing absent things,” the Indian said, picked his two baskets and walked towards his car.

Lerato looked in disbelief at her house and at the Indian. What was happening? Nothing was delusional about what she had seen.

She couldn't have been dreaming about the serpents. The snakes and the noose were real. The python was cold when she rubbed against it under the blankets. Perceptibly, she had brushed against the noose and seen it. How could she believe she was seeing things when she didn't have such a history?

"Stop the Indian!" she bellowed to the sergeant. "If I walk into the house and get bitten I'll sue him and the police! Two cobras and a python are in there!"

The Indian shook his head, hastened his pace and climbed into his car. "I don't know what else to say!" he shouted through a window. "I didn't come here to argue!"

Looking about, she picked half a brick, the blanket around her falling to the ground, and suddenly dashed in her blue nightdress and stood in front of his car, her hand drawn back to throw the brick. "Move the car and I'll stone the windscreen!"

Three policemen ran to restrain her, but she had attained her objective. The haematologist reluctantly alighted from his car. As calmly as before, his towering figure erect, his head held high, the Indian beckoned her and walked towards the house without the baskets. His leaving the baskets behind informed her that he was re-entering the house merely to prove her wrong and leave the place in peace. Yet she knew he was wrong and she would prove it.

She dropped the brick and followed him, as did the four policemen who initially entered the house with him. On entering the passage, she looked up. No noose dangled from the ceiling. A glance through the door to the sitting room revealed nothing extraordinary. The Indian walked reluctantly into the bedroom. Lerato stood framed in the doorway for some seconds.

On entering the bedroom, she noticed that indeed they had moved their mediocre furniture, and there were no snakes on the floor or on the bed. The bed and its headboard were in different positions. The drawers of her bureau and the doors of her wardrobe unit were open. The four policemen and the Indian stared at her as if awaiting further instructions.

She sighed and shook her head. "Two cobras hissed at each other on the floor," she said pointing at the spot. "The python was in bed with me."

"It's 01:33 hrs, ma'am," the haematologist informed her brusquely. "You raised a false alarm, that's what it is. We need to join our wives in bed."

"I saw them," she retorted, her countenance outrageous.

He laughed. "You *saw* them. Where're they now? Ghosts vanish, not snakes. If a snouted cobra were in this room or house, it would've long emerged by now to strike. When it isn't in its natural habitat and it's angry, striking becomes its priority."

"What about the python?"

"The python isn't good at playing hide-and-seek. It believes in its camouflage."

She bent and looked under the bed, moved to the wardrobe and peered inside cautiously. Returning to the bed, she looked at its heaped bedding; sheets, blankets and pillows, and gingerly poked it with her hands, cautiously stepping backwards. The men continued to stare at her, bored with her insistence.

From the main bedroom, they went into the second, the sitting room, the kitchen and the bathroom, Lerato, having lost faith in the men, searched desperately. She had seen the snakes and the noose. The men looked at her as if she were a monotonous stage actress.

The only anomaly she discovered was that a frosted bathroom window bereft of burglar bars was open. The window was big enough to admit an intruder. Suffering from the turmoil of the conviction her husband would die, she wasn't certain if she had forgotten to close it on going to bed. It was possible she had left it open. Ever since Lebokang's condition started to deteriorate dangerously she hadn't been herself.

"Can I go now?" the haematologist asked, standing behind her as she looked at the window.

Without turning to look at him, she ran fingers through her hair. "I don't know what to think. I don't know what's happening."

"You had a nightmare, that's all. Give yourself time to rest and you'll recover from it."

She wanted to protest, but found no basis. “You’ll forgive me for my untoward behaviour.”

Chapter 10

The morning was breezy and eerie, and the day, sun-flooded, typically African. As usual, the streets teemed with all sorts of people going about their businesses.

Coming from the direction of Compol Buildings housing the Police Museum, Lerato Makgunda left Bosman St and walked onto the premises of Pretoria's Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. In the cathedral's rockeries and manicured gardens grew foliages of lilies and chrysanthemums, Floribunda roses and peons, the merry flowers appearing to tender a hint of heavenly beauty.

But to Lerato, a woman who couldn't recall the last time she smiled genuinely, the flowers reminded her of unstrained mourning and the funerals of dear ones, all Makgundas, but mostly their teenage children they had buried in recent years. A tableau of their funeral processions played in her mind. Like fire dragon flickers in the dark, she recalled the expensive caskets, hearses and wreaths the premier sourced for every Makgunda who died.

Moagi, a chief suspect in the deaths, never bothered to find out why his relatives were perishing. Though she suspected him and could bet her life he was evil, it was the idolising praises from eulogists that soured her heart. By the graveside and in their unwarranted poetry and oration, they digressed from the dead and embarked on showering the rich man with praises as if he was the reason for the gatherings.

"I curse you, Moagi," she said between gritted teeth as she walked down a loose-cobbled sidewalk to the church's main wooden doors reinforced with trellis and other foundry works. "For allowing yourself to be a tool in the Devil's hands, I curse you to die painfully. Death and misfortune will haunt you. God, the Passover Angel is at Your disposal. Lance his heart as he has lanced the hearts of others. Quarter him like a butchery carcass."

Though the church wasn't comparable in size and grandeur to the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Jesus Christ the King in Johannesburg,

it was eye-catching and ornamental. Its double-pinnacle Gothic façade and the stained mica glass above the dual entrance showing a masterly mosaic of a shepherd and sheep, always grabbed her attention.

As she approached the cathedral's entrance, the atmosphere obtaining changed her mind. To wish the premier dead and to summon a dark angel against him meant she was in league with the Devil. The politician wasn't her tutor in things satanic. Indeed her husband might be lying in his deathbed, but that didn't warrant her to slide into darkness.

A bronze fontal holding sanctified water was in the building's anteroom. She dipped a finger in the water and crossed herself on the forehead, bosom and shoulders, mutely begging the Virgin Mary to ask God for forgiveness on her behalf.

When she turned a knob in one of its two doors, she was relieved to discover the door wasn't locked. The pews stood in neat rows, empty and inviting, the proportions of the building dwarfing her. She closed the door behind her and walked down the main aisle. Her footsteps echoed in the gallery and further in the eastern and western transepts. Grottos of Mary with Baby Jesus, human-size crucifixes and paintings of the Last Supper stared down at her.

Without its silver and golden appointments, the altar looked strange. Being a strict Sunday-church-goer, she had never seen it bereft of its appointments and linen. It appeared like a counter in a butcher's shop or a slab for mundane business. She wished she had come on a Sunday and seen the priest after Mass, when she would be sure to stand in the Holy of Holies and an audience with Father Hendrik van Vuuren meant an audience with God.

On nearing the altar after emerging from a section of the gallery obstructed with gigantic pillars, she found the priest in silent prayer before a grotto of the Virgin Mother in the eastern transept. His back to her, hands clasped prayerfully, he was in a dark suit and white collar. Lerato sat in a front pew and waited, but she couldn't help remarking wordlessly that without his customary robes the priest appeared ordinary and powerless.

After about fifteen minutes, the priest rose, crossed himself, genuflected before the statue and adjusted his jacket and collar. He looked so weary that she wondered if meditative prayer was as equally taxing as physical exercises. Turning, he walked towards her, his face indifferent as if she was an everyday part of the establishment. She stood up.

“Father Van Vuuren,” she said inadequately and fell silent.

“What can I do for you, my child? How’s your husband?”

“He’s battling for his life. The doctors are puzzled.”

“Everyone is; me too.” He shook her hand. “When I visited him last week his condition wasn’t encouraging. We must wait with endurance and hope in the power of Heaven. The Devil is tormenting him.”

“God allowed it.”

“Our Lord will give us the grace to bear the pain of watching him in that state. You wanted to suggest something?” He saw that she was hesitating. “When a child is born, a priest helps a couple celebrate. The same should apply when someone is set to make an exit from this world, the Devil’s playground. Do you want the services of the confessional or we can talk in my office?”

“Let’s go to your office, Father. I’ve nothing to confess at the moment.”

She followed him into the western transept, through a small door and a passage that took them past a door marked ‘vestry’ and into his office, a spacious room lined with wooden and metal cabinets and bookshelves. A large oaken managerial desk clustered with Bibles, a laptop, flash drives, discs, religious tomes, trays labelled ‘in’ and ‘out’ dominated the office.

Lerato thought the priest could do with help from an office orderly or a PA. Gesturing at a visitor’s chair, the priest went round the desk and sat in an impressive velvet swivel chair. On the walls hung religious artefacts, small crucifixes and framed paintings of the Vatican, Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI in their official regalia.

“You may be of the opinion he needs sepulchral rites while his body and soul are still together,” he suggested as soon as they were seated. “Have you come to ask me to offer him terminal prayers?”

“It isn’t about my husband. I came to seek your intervention.”

“God gave me the ears, the mandate and the time to listen to your concerns, worries and sins. There’s no shortage of absolution in the house of our Lord when it comes to the remission of sins. Because of sin we err and invite error in our lives.”

“I believe someone is trying to scare or kill me.”

“Believe in the omnipresent protection of God, my child. Believe in the unfailing protection of our patron saints. Believe in the Blood of the Lamb shed for our justification and righteousness.”

“I do.” She crossed herself. “Two nights ago someone dumped two cobras and a python in my bedroom. Whoever did it hung a noose in the passage of our house.”

He was pensive for a while. “This is a matter for the police, Mrs Makgunda.”

“The police and a snake specialist came to my house during the night, but they found neither the snakes nor the noose.”

“Are you sure you saw the things you’re talking about?”

“Two cobras, a python and a noose *were* in the house. I saw them.”

“One cannot be too sure, my child. Prophet Ezekiel, a man of God, saw visions but even he, pious as he was, couldn’t describe them in exactitude. He wrote that he saw creatures with the likeness of four living creatures and an appearance like burning coals of fire. He likened the creatures to lamps.”

“Father, I didn’t see a vision. I saw snouted cobras on the floor. A python was in bed with me.”

“If you weren’t dreaming then you saw things that looked like snakes and something that appeared like a noose; otherwise there is no other explanation. You’re a child of God, it cannot be ruled out that you saw a vision.” He paused. “If indeed you saw them, who could’ve placed them in your house? Do you’ve enemies, Mrs Makgunda?”

“Whoever is my enemy wants me dead.”

“This is a case strictly for the police. Investigating or trying to demystify a puzzle is outside the scope of my calling.”

“I’d a brief altercation with my brother-in-law, the premier of Gauteng.”

“Do you suppose he’s behind the incident?”

“I can’t suspect anyone besides him, Father.”

“It’s a sin to accuse anyone baselessly. I’m not exonerating Hon. Moagi Makgunda; he may be as guilty as the son of perdition himself, but pray against bearing grudges and a possible satanic tendency to make enemies out of people who possibly love you.”

“I’m not prejudiced against anyone, Father. The attack might be a prelude to something worse.”

He studied her and pondered. “Like I said, the occurrence is criminal and for the police. What would a priest do?”

“Broker peace between the premier and me before something terrible happens.”

“Hon. Moagi Makgunda is a very rich man. Rich people can be very dangerous when angry. He may sue you for slander, character assassination, political defamation and other things.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “I must go back to my prayers, Mrs Makgunda. First Thessalonians says we must pray without ceasing.”

“Of course, Father. Thank you and pray for me too.”

“I’ll, my child, yes, I’ll.” He smiled. “*In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*”

They stood up and shook hands over the desk.

Chapter 11

His boots clattering on the wooden stairs, César Sergio Miguel parted a beaded curtain and descended into the basement of his rented house in Sunnyside, but the squeaky chat of rats in a closed basket he carried muffled the clatter. Under an armpit, he held a live hybrid chicken, white, vapid and unruffled. The rodents sounded as if they knew their fate and were accordingly saying their last words in a discordant orchestra.

Outside it was getting dark.

For César Miguel, darkness and its advent meant the opening of doors and opportunities. In the dark, people did all sorts of things; drugs moved, plots were executed, people were killed and people made money. He was thirty-five years old but looked ten years older from smoking, drinking, womanising and tactless bodybuilding and weightlifting.

What else, he usually asked himself, could occupy a killer other than whores?

His eyes had seen too much gore. His ears had heard many desperate pleas. He wasn't a saviour; therefore he had taken lives according to his calling. South Africa was kind to him; many politicians and rich people had many enemies, which translated to Paradise for him. At the rate of an assassination or two a month, he was doing remarkably well and looked forward to retiring before he was forty-five, but not before he handled a jackpot job.

In Madrid, where he was raised on poverty and second-hand marijuana smoke, he was by day a picador and a snake charmer at the age of nineteen, but moonlighted as an assassin. In the Spain of his knowledge, from Bilbao to Gibraltar, many people weren't what they appeared; waiters were pimps, government ministers were drug barons, priests were assassins, safari tour guides were whores, whores were couriers and tools for unseating cabinet ministers, governors and presidents. Spain was a misleading canvas.

Back home, his nocturnal payments had been meagre. Often, he had killed for as little as a hundred pesetas. Human life wasn't an object to him. But the experience was worth it. By his hand, many men and women had fallen in Madrid and Barcelona. Using pistols, knives, poison and his bare hands, he killed them in their bedrooms, on beaches, and in car parks and brothels.

Though no one suspected him, he was aware Spanish forensic experts were gathering clues against him. Then, taking a cue from Cecil John Rhodes, the nineteenth century British explorer and businessman, he sailed to South Africa as a stowaway. He was thirty then and vying to be rich, which meant sitting pretty and not having to call anyone his boss or landlord.

Unlike Spain, South Africa was a giant awakening from years of slumber, isolation and socio-political retrogression. Some Boers were keen on maintaining the Apartheid era status quo, and major political parties were reeling from internal squabbling and mistrust among their top echelon members. Such rivalry and discontent was enough to give him jobs and keep him busy for many years. César was right in his assumption; it did.

César Miguel's day was beginning. It always began without variation in his small basement. Among the hiss and rattle of serpents, it began with a feeding ritual. On landing, he stood shirtless amid a score of baskets and ventilated wooden crates.

Eagle, dragon and reptilian Indian-ink tattoos covered his skin, light ones on his cheeks and forehead. He thought they gave him a sophisticated look, especially during performances. Some people thought he looked like Antonio Banderas, the Spanish actor. He believed it was the actor who looked like him; not the other way round.

On the rough floor lay a python, coiled, docile but staring at him. Unlike the other snakes in the basement, the five-metre python had the freedom of the house. At times he found it in the kitchen, other times in the bathroom when it was extremely hot, but its favourite spot was on his bed. For that reason, he closed and locked the main door only.

Having performed daring feats in schools and theatres in Pretoria, the Midrand and Johannesburg, people knew him as a snake charmer par excellence. But he was far from a snake charmer. It was beneath him to be one. The occupation, just like his picador job, was a façade camouflaging his livelihood. In his profession it paid to keep the police uninterested in him.

Being a crowd-drawing picador taught him the essence of understanding the importance of safeguarding one's life as a daredevil. Indeed, everything about him was daring. People knew him as an itinerant performer scrapping a living from schoolchildren and theatre-goers, while unknown to them he roamed the streets at night, liquidating defence and prosecution witnesses, rival politicians and businessmen other politicians and businessmen hired him to eliminate. Never a suspect in the dozens of assassinations he carried out in Gauteng Province and beyond, he was thorough and good, the hallmarks of a professional assassin.

He placed the chicken before the python. The snake lowered its head imperceptibly. The chicken watched the snake, but its curiosity dwindled. The python slowly coiled further, sliding into attack mode. César watched the two, mesmerised.

Watching the python feed entertained him. The snake was a dramatic pretender. Before prey, it stealthily switched into gear, lowering the head and tensing in preparation for a startling leap. An observer would think it wasn't interested in its meal.

The chicken was about to scrounge for grains when the python lunged forward, yawning, its length wrapping around the prey. The chicken didn't see it coming. At César's feet, the python began swallowing the bird whole.

Carefully opening one crate after the other, he patted his snakes and fed them the rats. In the basement were puffer adders, rattle snakes, Egyptian and snouted cobras, a black mamba and a Gabon viper. During his forty-minute performances, spectators watched the snakes moving all over him and feared for his life. None of them knew he was the real snake killing their MPs, mayors, fathers and mothers in the dead of the night. Had they known, they would've wished the reptiles struck him dead.

César Sergio Miguel missed his picador life back home in Spain, a life of honour and celebrity in a country of ceremony and etiquette. Bullfighters were aloof epitomes of courage and grace. He missed the procession of the *cuadrilla*, the cape-holding youths in the runway between the arena and the spectators' seats who distracted the bull. He missed the blood-cuddling and adrenaline charges of woofing bulls. He missed galloping on a horse towards a beast ploughing the arena with its hooves.

The calculated lancing, standing ovation and prolonged applause of the *charlotada* crowds and the rain of pesetas in the bullring, he missed. If there were foreign tourists among the spectators, pound sterling and American dollars flew towards him. He was tipped to become a prestigious matador and had imagined himself one ever since Madrid's bullfight aficionados started doffing their hats at him as if he was already a certified bullfighter.

A picador did a matador's donkey work by arresting the bull's dangerous hooking tendencies. Graduating into a matador was what he hoped for. With a red cape furled over his left arm, a despatching sword in his right, it would show that bullfighting was his lifeblood. But life was devious and ruthless. Here he was in South Africa playing snake charmer, a life devoid of pomp and ceremony. Nothing was macho and Spanish about fidgeting with snakes. In Madrid, especially in communities that revered bullfighters, a man of such depravity hardly charmed any women.

He was feeding the last snake, a mamba, when a call came on his cell-phone. The caller appeared as 'Private No'. Most of his clients preferred anonymity.

"Hello."

"Hello. *It's me.*" The voice was male and familiar.

"It's also me here," he said, his eyes on the black mamba whose eyes were on two rats he had placed in its crate. The snake wasn't stirring as if it were a wound hosepipe in a hay-padded wooden container. The rats fussed about looking for an exit.

"*Can we meet at the motel in thirty minutes?*"

"You call the shots."

The call ended.

Without warning, the black mamba struck one of the rats and held on. The rat stretched its legs, stiffened, died within moments and vanished in the snake's mouth, reminding him that of all the serpents he kept, the mamba was the most unpredictable and lethal.

Most people in the snake-charming trade didn't dare tame black mambas. Haematologists knew them as aggressive over-killers that struck ceaselessly for as long as the prey or victim showed signs of life. He waited for the mamba to strike the second rat. It did, with the same indifference and swiftness.

Chapter 12

After twenty minutes, César Sergio Miguel roared out of his rental house's garage on a Harley-Davidson motorbike, a Sportster Forty-Eight. The streets, dark and treacherous, contrasted sharply with his arresting, glistening, red motorcycle.

He was in black gloves, a black Cordoba hat hanging on his back, a black leather jacket and a red bandana showing underneath his black Nazi-style helmet. Riding at full throttle, he imagined himself as the angel of death Mankind was warned against in the Book of Revelations.

The Rotherham Motel was in the outskirts of Pretoria, a sprawling resort boasting of a zoo, several swimming pools and a golf course. César slowed down and turned onto the premises of the motel. A car park was beyond the reception. He saw a familiar Rolls-Royce limousine among the parked cars. A uniformed chauffeur stood outside wiping its windscreen with a cloth while two men in dark suits and glasses stood guard near the car.

Smoking, the Cordoba hat having replaced the helmet, César left the motorcycle in a riders' slot near the reception and walked down a corridor towards a bar. Prostitutes and pimps mingled with patrons in the corridor. Two men were kissing, their egos forgotten, so were two women beside them. Near the end of the corridor, he turned into a spacious bar packed and humming with jeers and the buzz of hushed conversations. Despite the interior being air-conditioned, the air was hazy with cigar and cigarette smoke.

Heavy rock music played. Pole dancers frolicked and gyrated topless on several stages in the bar. The atmosphere reminded him of the Houdini Club de Magia in Madrid.

Standing in a corner, César looked at the dancers with disinterest. He began searching the bar table by table, bench by bench, chair by chair, until he saw his client on a stool by a counter. The premier was in a dim area watching him.

A slender arm sensually went round the Spaniard's shoulders. César looked at the arm and then turned the other side to see its owner, a white, elfin woman in her mid-twenties. She was in a denim miniskirt and a top revealing the cleavage in her tattooed bosom.

"Hi, big boy." Her face was angular and overdone with cosmetics. "Are you looking for company?" She stood back a little and put her other arm on his shoulder.

César looked over her shoulder at his client perched on a stool across the bar. "Why do you care?" He puffed smoke into her face. "I'm a eunuch."

"You wanna act out a sexual fantasy?" Her arms slid from his shoulders. She caressed his chest. "What's your name, gladiator?"

"Gladiator is my name. I don't have any other."

"Can I get you a tot of whiskey?"

His eyes riveted on his client, he shook his head. "Get out of my sight."

"You look foreign. I like foreigners."

"Then go outside the country. Go to China."

At the bar, his client folded his arms across his chest, a signal that everything was well and César must make his way to the exact rendezvous.

"Who're you staring at?" The whore asked; turning and looking in the direction of the counter. "I see men and no pretty women in that direction. Don't tell me you're gay."

"Leave me alone. This is your last warning."

She made a face like one about to spit, stepped back sizing him with disdain, and walked away, vanishing in the crowds. If she hadn't heeded his final warning, he would've defaced her with clenched fists. Most prostitutes understood the language of violence, and violence was his lifeblood. César Sergio Miguel folded his arms in the same manner as his client; everything was well too from his side.

Moagi gulped the contents of his glass and made his way out of the bar. He was in a broad hat and an overcoat, his attempt at disguise. Feigning interest in pole-dancing, César spent a minute before he followed the premier. After going down a series of passages and corridors, he walked into a toilet and stood before a

urinary basin. Apart from one closed cubicle door, suggestive of an occupant, the toilet was empty. The premier issued from the cubicle and came to stand at the next basin. Both men tampered with the zips of their trousers.

César knew he had to be brief and précis. “I fired the warning shot.”

“How did you do it?”

“I broke into her house through a bathroom window. The snakes scared her insane.”

“A policeman told me he didn’t see any snakes or a noose. Are you out to swindle me?”

“I removed everything when she ran out of the house.”

“Why did you remove them?”

“The police work with evidence, sir.”

“How can I trust you?”

“Find out from the woman or her neighbours.”

“I’d kindle suspicion. You think the message got through?”

“She screamed like a timid girl locked alive in a mortuary.”

The premier dipped a hand into the breast pocket of his overcoat and gave César an inch-thick roll of fifty-dollar US banknotes. “As agreed.”

César quickly pocketed the money.

“If she doesn’t contact me with an apology I’ll ask you to—” Moagi made a cutthroat gesture.

“That would be fifty thousand rand or six thousand US dollars.”

“I’ll double the amount if the job is done to my satisfaction. If you need anything, let me know.”

“I enjoy doing business with you, Hon. Makgunda.”

“Don’t mention my name! You know the rules—”

A drunken man entered. The meeting ended.

Chapter 13

At five minutes past nine that night, hours after Lerato Makgunda visited the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart; Father Hendrik van Vuuren sat in the lounge of his rectory, troubled with what she had told him and undecided on the action to take. As a priest he wanted to be a good shepherd; the one who brokered and advocated peace between antagonistic parties. Lerato and the politician were his sheep. Both seemed fearful of the Lord.

Sitting still in a leather sofa, Lerato's words playing verbatim in the back of his mind, he saw the two's commitment in their regular tithing and offerings, though the billionaire's contribution surpassed that of the entire congregation put together. The premier was a respected philanthropist; many things proved it. Among other philanthropic undertakings, he was the benefactor of a special orphanage in Limpopo Province where his rural home was. It was a pity she suspected Moagi of intimidating her.

If he suggested to the premier her suspicions, it might enrage the politician whether he was innocent or not, and stop money from flowing into the coffers of the church. Of course, God was the Head of the Church, but money made things tick and gave them substance and form. The Book of Ecclesiastics put it very well: *A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.*

He lived in comfort as a priest courtesy of the premier's generosity. As was Joseph of Arimathea to Jesus, an unsung disciple, valuable yet forever in the shadows until the final moment, Moagi was an indispensable asset.

However, if he sat on what she told him, and she was murdered, her blood would be on his hands. From the age of twenty-five, when he was ordained priest until now, when his head was becoming hoary, he had prayed against being found wanting on the Day of Judgment. It would be an embarrassment if he were arraigned as an accomplice to murder.

After several minutes, the priest stirred, yawned and made the Sign of the Cross. For allowing himself to admit that money, instead of the Holy Spirit, gave the church impetus, he was sour inside. Father Van Vuuren hated it when he thought carnally despite his convictions.

Over thirty years of priesthood had failed to engrain it in his head that the Lord sustained all things. Thinking in monetary terms was mundane. All things mundane pertained to the Devil. As a parish priest, God's ordained representative in Pretoria, it would've soothed and boosted his self-esteem had he thought strictly in terms of dependability on God, not man.

Resolute to make peace with the Lord that evening, he walked out of the rectory, locked the door behind him and made his way down a pergola to the cathedral about fifty metres away. He entered the building through the vestry, turned on the lights and stood genuflecting before the altar.

St Alphonsus, patron saint of sinners, and Mary Magdalene, patron saint of penitent sinners, would behave God to forgive him for thinking carnally. God would bestow a new heart in him, one that didn't revere man. He was in need of a revival and a renewal of his mind, or he would fall short of the glory of God.

Meditative, he knelt, his eyes on a large crucifix on the rear wall. The curving impressed it on him that Christ suffered and he, Hendrik van Vuuren, didn't have to suffer indeed or in thought.

Kneeling, hands clasped, he was set to raise his voice in prayer when a faint noise startled him. It came from the direction of the main door. Was someone in the cathedral or in the atrium? He looked over his shoulder and saw nothing but polished pews in meticulous rows.

The cathedral struck him as a divine receptacle of God. By and large, it was a colossal altar of the Most High, symbolic of the Ark of the Covenant Israel carried to war. But this was South Africa, a land of violent sacrilegious rapists, neo-sodomites, robbers and Satanists.

Who would lurk in the house of the Lord? Momentarily it impinged on him that this land of superstitious Boers and native Africans was home to bizarre *sangomas* too. If a *sangoma* instructed

someone to fetch white priestly blood for use as a ritualistic ingredient, certainly someone could ambush him in the rectory or inside the cathedral.

But did he have to be afraid when he was inside the Ark of the Covenant? With his fear he was belittling God. Heaven had no scarcity of fighting angels and archangels. The God he genuflected to was the Lord of Armies.

“Father,” he prayed, “in my thoughts and in my fears I’m a sinner—”

The noise, which struck him as predatory, came again.

He stopped and looked over his shoulder, only to scan empty pews and stare at wall-hangings. Crucifixes and paintings looked down at him. Neither the rectory nor the cathedral proper were haunted. Certainly someone or something was either inside or outside the cathedral. The noises, though he couldn’t place them, were as real as the cathedral. Curiosity and self-preservation drew him to his feet. He would seek God’s audience after he was sure of his safety, or he could be attacked and killed in a prayer posture.

Father Van Vuuren knew he could do with a weapon, preferably a shotgun. But there were no guns at the cathedral though the building wasn’t completely bereft of other weapons. He rushed to the vestry’s inner entrance and opened a passage closet with theatrical attire for the cathedral’s religious dramas. Inside were ancient Roman warrior garbs, barbed spears, swords and large crucifixes among a diversity of other props for the annual enactment of the crucifixion of Christ by the parish’s drama club.

He picked a sword sheathed in a scabbard and returned to the main gallery, drawing it and wishing the invisible source of his intimidation to see he was now armed and dangerous. The scabbard fell on the floor. He walked gingerly down the major aisle, the main doors looming.

The priest wished Archangel Michael would protect him. The palm of the hand brandishing the sword dampened with moisture. Thrice he placed the weapon in his left hand and wiped the palm against the seat of his trousers, but he kept walking, alert and stealth.

Except for his footsteps, unnerving silence prevailed. If the noise came again, he would try to determine its exact source and perhaps figure out what was producing it. Perhaps it was nothing outside the usual cries of cats that favoured the serenity of the cathedral. The silence continued.

I'm more than a conqueror, he told himself. *No weapon fashioned against me shall prosper.*

At the door he paused, listening, his heart pounding, his ears perceiving no noise except the howl of the wind through the foliage in the forecourt. With his left hand, he fished a bundle of keys from a hip pocket and opened the door. Light from the cathedral flooded an empty atrium. Relieved, he lowered the sword.

But a movement and a sigh drew his attention to his feet. The priest stepped back instinctively, panicking and holding the sword towards an object on the floor, his eyes widening. It was a white baby wrapped in a dark blanket.

Someone had placed the infant at a doorpost clear of the doorway. Whoever had done it had guarded against the young life being trodden. Father Hendrik van Vuuren crossed himself. Moments ago he feared for his life, now he had stumbled on life and he was beside himself with relief. The child was as white as he was.

The priest knelt, placed the sword on the floor, picked the child and cradled him in his arm. A close inspection of the baby revealed that it was a black albino male about three months old. The child was naked and wore amulets around his neck and wrists. Many native South African tribes burdened their children with protective charms and elixirs. The priest, a descendant of foreign pioneers, couldn't tell if the child was Zulu, Pedi, Xhosa, Tswana, Sotho or belonged to some other tribe.

The baby yawned and began to cry feebly, hinting him it was on the verge of passing out. Projecting from the antechamber into the gargantuan cavity of the gallery, the building corrupted the cry into a wolverine sound.

Chapter 14

From Minnaar St, Regis staggered like a stricken bull in the shambles. At times appearing to fall on his face, at times walking sideward like a crab, scolding himself and laughing at his disorientation, he hobbled past the Museum of Geological Survey into Andries St, Burgers Park appearing before him. He was too drunk to smell its fragrances that usually welcomed him *home*. Mumbling and gesturing, often pointing at the sky, he drank from a vodka bottle now almost empty.

Drink yourself dead, nigger, he urged himself ambivalently. Drink yourself stiff, *kaffir*.

Agnes Lamola crossed his mind and blurred. Life wasn't about finding out what happened to her at Moagi's mansion. Life remained life whether Agnes was dead, alive, sad or happy. She wasn't his prerogative. If he weren't careful, life would pass him by while he stressed himself over a married woman who hated him to the marrow in his bones. What transpired at the mansion was her problem. His stupid mind had to accept that Agnes was a cripple married to a cripple.

He saw things in pairs, three- and foursomes and laughed scornfully at himself. What was he in the entire human scheme? It was now a chronic question with one answer. He was a wreck and a pauper, earthly scum; he reminded himself, laughing and cursing God.

"Vodka, my love," he said to the beverage bottle, "take me quick to the cemetery. I gave you the right to destroy my life. Why do you take long to kill me? What's your problem, sweetheart?" He laughed and entered the park. "Tectonic plates are moving. Nuclear warheads are aimed at cities. Everything ends in tragedy."

Lit by a few lampposts, at night Burgers Park was a collection of foliage and shadows. He meandered through passages and pergolas, drunkenly walking across flowerbeds and waking vagrants who threatened and swore at him, until he came to the southern width

adjacent to Melrose House across Jacob Maré St. As he had expected, he found Aluwani in his streetlight-lit spot on a secluded patch of lawn surrounded with pansies and violas.

Melrose House fascinated the vagrant; the reason he fancied the spot that allowed him to stare at the building across the road whenever he was *home*. Aluwani sat among his scant belongings; two worn out travelling bags and a stuffed hessian sack. He was rolling a makeshift cigar from tobacco and a piece of newspaper. The man was about thirty and ungainly, though he looked older than his age from exposure, misery and drinking. A native who hardly washed his body, in daytime he appeared like a coalminer at the end of a shift, but now he was a big-headed silhouette.

“Can we talk for a while, Aluwani?”

“We can talk till morning, comrade. I can’t sleep... too many mosquitoes and lice. Why did God create lice?”

“Go ask a priest,” Regis said rudely, annoyed. “Have you ever robbed a bank, Alu?”

“Hey! Don’t talk as if robbing a bank and masturbating are the same.”

“Do you want to die in the streets? Do you want a pauper’s burial?”

“How’s that your damn business, Regis?”

“Any fool will tell you it isn’t proper for any person to be buried without ceremony. Life is about choices, Alu.”

“You’re drunk, bastard. Go to your room and sleep.” He pointed towards the centre of the park. “Don’t talk to me about choices. You’re stupid and homeless. Now you want to madden me, is that so?”

“Russians drink every day, but were sensible enough to break the Soviet Union. They fought over Chechnya, but were sensible enough to talk.”

“Regis, if you’re not sensible you’ll die of booze.”

“All vagrants die of booze and pneumonia. They’ll put you in an unmarked grave and say no eulogy. No one will remember you. We must rob a bank.”

“You think if you robbed a bank you’d be remembered? And why does a damn nincompoop like you want to be remembered?”

“Yes, I’ve lived a vagrant’s life, but I won’t die one, Alu. I’ll soar like an eagle.” He staggered and sat beside him. “I won’t die in obscurity. We’re eugenically undesirable. Thank God we weren’t born in America in the 1930s.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Under America’s policy of vaccination we’d have been sterilised. Vagrancy would’ve endangered our genitals.”

“Regis, you read damn too much. You’ve the head of a professor, but it got you nowhere. Do me a favour; go to your *room*. Find someone else to tell your dreams and see if they won’t punch you in the face.”

“You’re a hopeless dunderhead... wasted seed. In the parable of the planter it must’ve been mentioned that one seed fell in Burgers Park, don’t you think?”

“We’re swimming in the same damn sewage. We’re nonentities... zeros.”

“That isn’t an honest description. We’re in the category of smallpox, yellow fever, measles and polio. Take a sip, nincompoop.” He handed him the bottle. “Imagine owning a house with a cellar and a swimming pool. Imagine sitting down in your own house and a butler serving you the best Scotch whisky and Russian vodka.”

Aluwani gulped once and winced. “This shit isn’t diluted!”

“By sipping you took a risk. That’s what life is, taking risks and not waiting to die.”

“What’re you talking about, Regis?”

“I’m talking about robbing a bank.”

Aluwani laughed scornfully and sipped the vodka. “You wish to rob the Reserve Bank of South Africa?”

“We’ll rob the Binomial Bank of South Africa.”

“The one across the street? You’re damn serious, Regis?”

“Yes. We’ll be rich.”

“I don’t want to rob a bank. Why are you telling me?”

“So that I can kill you if you aren’t interested. I’ll slit your throat while you sleep.”

“Damn it! You’re out of your mind. Paupers don’t kill each other, it’s unheard of.”

“People who know too much get killed. Are you in or out?”

“How do you rob a bank?”

“Alu, are you in or out? Don’t sign your death warrant.”

“Hey! Can’t we talk when we’re sober?”

“I think properly when I’m plastered.”

“You’re telling me you’ll rob Binomial in a drunken stupor?”

“Tell me if you’re in, Alu.”

“All along you were plotting to kill me... *your* buddy?”

“All along I was planning how to get out of this hole. If I must kill you it’ll be to cover my back.”

“That’s selfish and damn Taliban of you.”

“That’s life. It’s cruel. No wonder no one wants to live twice.”

“Lazarus lived twice. I don’t damn think he regretted it.” Aluwani pasted his cigar with spittle. “You’re possessed, Regis. Once you walk into BBSA with a pistol in your hand, they’ll shoot you dead or jail you for life.”

“We’re dead. Look at yourself. You really think you’re alive? Don’t you want to rise from the dead? You must live in a house and get married.”

“Living in a house is cool. I like that, but I don’t want to marry. Women marry for money. When their husbands go bankrupt they desert them. When the husbands find them, they shoot them in the head and shoot themselves through the mouth.”

“Women don’t live with dead men. A man cannot attract women and greenflies at the same time.”

Aluwani sighed with exaggerated exasperation. “I’m damn tired of talking to you, Reggie. I’m not going to rob any bank. You’re irritating me. No one is rich in our family. I don’t desire to be rich. I’m Venda. Poverty suits me very well.”

“I knew you were dead, but I never thought you were foolish. A man approaches you with a golden proposal, you tell him you’re Venda and at home with poverty. I hate you.”

“Why are you telling me? It’s within my damn rights to be clever or foolish. If you were clever you wouldn’t be wallowing like a pig here.”

Regis clicked his tongue in anger. “You’re an embarrassment to yourself. You often sit staring at Melrose, which suggested to me you were ambitious. Why don’t you kill yourself as a personal favour?”

“BaVenda are contented people; they don’t kill themselves.” He paused and scowled his face. “None of my ancestors robbed a bank.”

“Because there were no banks in South Africa. We’ll rob the bank and split the money.”

“If I were you, Regis, I’d rather kiss a stray bitch than walk into a bank. You’re damn suicidal, scallywag.”

“I swear on my father’s grave I’ll kill you this week.” Regis snatched the bottle of vodka from Aluwani’s hands. “I’ll piss on your godforsaken corpse,” he said indignantly in English and walked away.

Chapter 15

Moagi Makgunda sat behind his desk in his thirteenth floor office in the East Wing of the Gauteng Provincial Government Building in Marshalltown, Johannesburg. A cup of coffee and a cutting from France's *L'Express* were before him. In French, the cutting talked about a police raid at the Château Richelieu and a fire that gutted it later.

He was looking at full-length photographs of Heidi Gaynor. She was young and beautiful. It astounded him that André Giovanni Puccini, the Sicilian, had found her in a brothel. But in the back of his mind he worried about the tornado closing in on him. The attempted bestial attacks on Eula and Eurydice were omens. Years ago he had been warned not to wait for the signs. Now they had come, vivid and forceful. He just had to do something, or he would lose face.

January was coming to an end. He expected the British girl in mid-February, when he couldn't afford to wait even a few days. Would Heidi be able to make it in time? She was a missing rubber stopper. Had André understood why he wanted her in his mansion, and the urgency of the matter, he would've found a non-inconveniencing trick to hoodwink her into believing there was employment for her in some capacity. However, had he told the Sicilian the truth, André could've thought him absurd and material for commitment into an asylum for the criminally insane.

Though on the outside he appeared relaxed and on top of his world, turmoil ran deep in his mind and heart. How could he hurry André to send the girl to Pretoria? As he shuffled the photographs André passed to him at the Vatican, he hoped something would avail itself as a stop-gap measure while he waited for Heidi.

One of three telephones on his desk rang. He picked the receiver.

"Sir," his personal assistant said on the line, "*there's Father Hendrik van Vuuren to see you. He's no appointment and he says it's urgent.*"

“I’m never too busy to see a man of God. Send him through, Mpho.” He stowed away the photographs and the copy of the *L’Express* and stood up to welcome the priest.

Father Hendrik van Vuuren walked into the office carrying a wrapped baby in his arms. “The Lord be with you, Hon. Makgunda,” the priest said, greeting him. “It’s a very pleasant morning.”

The premier went round his desk, mutely shook the priest’s hand and quickly relieved him of the child. “Please, sit down, Father. The Lord is using you mightily, I can see.”

“I suppose so, my child. What would please a priest other than being a tool in the hand of his Master?” They sat facing each other in leather sofas in the lounging section of the spacious office. “You’re a busy man, Honourable; therefore I won’t consume much of your time. Somebody left the child in the atrium yester-night.”

“Have doctors looked at him?” Moagi didn’t take his eyes from the baby. It’s strange, staring and playful eyes captivated him. The child, in a woollen hat and fleece attire, appeared to be appraising him. Suddenly it wailed and fell silent.

“I took him to a private hospital yesterday. A paediatrician examined him. The doctor said the boy needed nutrition, warm clothing and a home. He certified him stable.”

“We thank God, Father Van Vuuren.”

“I’ve a letter from the Department of Social Welfare and a police permit authorising me to keep the child as a temporal guardian. Would you be obliged to accept the poor child into your orphanage?”

“When we take care of orphans and widows we befriend God.”

“At times I think you were called as a priest, my child. You speak with the conviction of a man of God.”

“Thank you, Father. I wish I could bend myself more to the dictates of the scriptures.”

“The child needs a name.”

“He’s a special child,” Moagi said in reference to the child’s albinism. “He’ll need a corresponding special name. Would you christen him, Father?” He looked at the priest for the first time ever since he held the child.

“His name shall be Simon; the one who assisted our Lord by carrying the cross. As an orphan, he is assisting you befriend God.”

“Thank you for the inspired name, Father.” The premier was visibly excited. He picked a receiver on a low table between them and dialled a number. “Come to my office, Mpho.” He put down the receiver.

Shortly, a middle-aged woman in an expensive costume knocked once and entered.

“Mpho,” he said to the woman and pointed at the child. “Kindly arrange for Simon to be driven to Randlord as soon as possible. Make sure he’s everything a child might need until we fly him to Limpopo.”

“Yes, sir.” She exited with the child.

“I know you took a vow of poverty, Father, but you can do with a few dollars. Christ was made poor so that we could be exceedingly rich.” He left his sofa and started to a Chubb safe in a corner behind his desk. After aligning some security dials on the door, he pulled it open. It was packed with stacks of euro, pounds and American dollars. He took out a fistful of US hundred-dollar banknotes that strained his fingers.

“To-date I’ve brought you three unfortunate albinos,” the priest said, filling an uncomfortable silence that ensued.

“I’m grateful, Father.” The premier said closing the door and misaligning the dials, his back to the priest. “You’ll allow me to express my gratitude.”

“Every time I bring you a child you reward me. I wonder if it’s necessary and Catholic, Hon. Makgunda.”

“Rich men aren’t without relevance in the spiritual world.”

“I thought so. Simon of Cyrene availed his physical strength. Joseph of Arimathaea took custody of our Lord’s body. But at times the things that we see with our eyes lead us astray.”

“What do you mean, Father?”

“Lot saw the greenery on the other side and made a wrong turn. Pieces of silver led Judas Iscariot to the Field of Blood.”

The premier grinned and walked back to his sofa. “You’re the shepherd. If you’re scared of violating a vow, you can take this

money to a charity home of your choice.” He placed the money on a coffee table between them. The money made a formidable stack within the priest’s reach.

Father Van Vuuren gazed at the money.

“Accept my gift, Father Van Vuuren; it may go a long way in emancipating the poor.”

“Of course, Hon. Makgunda.” The priest reached for the stack. “God bless you for having the poor at heart.”

“Thank you, Father. We’re blessed to bless others.”

The money couldn’t fit in a single pocket; therefore the priest stuffed it into four pockets. “By the way, Mrs Lerato Makgunda visited me at the cathedral yesterday.”

The premier scratched his chin. “Was she well?”

“I don’t know how to put it in a non-offensive way, but she suspects you were behind a recent attempt to kill her with snakes.”

Moagi laughed brazenly and clapped his hands in a phoney dramatic applause. “My sister-in-law is a stressed woman.”

“I told her so. The Devil may be trying to make her see enemies in good people. Is there room in your heart to forgive her?”

“I don’t bear grudges, Father. If a believer tries to pursue his enemies, they’ll lead him to Hell. No one but Satan is my enemy.”

“Pray for her. Love her. The stream of heavenly blessings flowing into your life won’t cease. Pamper her with gifts until you win her heart and trust and a reward from Heaven.”

He noticed that the priest was beginning to perspire.

Chapter 16

Their background the beautiful gardens of Burgers Park, three days after their drunken altercation, Regis and Aluwani sat on the edge of the pavement watching the branch of Binomial Bank of South Africa across Andries St. In beggarly clothing, the two sat quietly. Regis was focussed despite constant distractions from the belt of traffic on the road, and a drooling Aluwani who frequently pointed at whorish women.

After watching the bank for about half an hour since ten o'clock that morning, Regis finally turned and looked at his companion, only to find him staring at a swaggering slender woman in leggings and stilettos.

"You find women irresistible?" Regis said, partially sarcastically and partially pitying him. "Live by the sword, die by the sword."

"A man on the lowest ebb cannot fall. We die once. We're in goddamned limbo."

"We're trying to work our way out of Hell and you allow yourself to lose focus. Look at the bank and concentrate. Think of ways to out manoeuvre its security systems."

"I dropped out of school because I couldn't damn concentrate. I'm not a NASA scientist. Stop criticising my damn ways and tell me how we rob the bank. How do we rob the bank?"

"That's the question," Regis said with genuine mirth. "How do we rob the bank?"

Aluwani frowned. "Gutter rat, you're asking me? A gutter rat asking a gutter rat how to rob a bank? You forced me to be an accomplice, now you want me to tell you how we're going to rob BBSA. You're a joke, skunk."

"We're in this together. Our roles in this project are equal, so shall be our shares or prison sentences if we're caught."

"I'll tell the damn judge I robbed the bank under duress. You threatened my life."

“We won’t end up in the rut if we plan it properly. Think like a brain surgeon before an operation.” Regis sighed in anger. “See the robbery as a natural presentiment to launch us to a new realm. I see nothing vague in the result if we allow ourselves to think at this stage.”

“If there’s one person who can’t think, that’s me. I don’t want to think. I don’t want loads of money. I don’t desire a pompous life. You can call me Gandhi or a dunderhead. My parents feared I had hydrocephalus from the size of my head.” He held his head with both hands. “Look at it; I wasn’t designed to think.”

“I want you to concentrate or there’s no deal, which means you’re a dead man talking, Alu. I’m not an intellectual, yet I’m trying to think like Pythagoras.”

“That’s dead impressive. When I imagine us in the bank and armed policemen surrounding it, I see that many robbers think like Pythagoras, but die like Muammar Gaddafi.” Aluwani grinned and scratched his head. “The damn bank is a 2010 thing and fairly new. They can’t afford a complicated security system. Maybe the bank manager sits on a goatskin in his office.”

“You’re now thinking, dunderhead.”

“We walk in pretending to be brandishing pistols under our clothes. We order everyone down. We walk out with millions and split them unless you want to kill me after the damn robbery.”

“There’s an armed security guard and cameras inside the bank. If a staff member triggers an alarm the police will condone the area with rifles within minutes. They’ll either arrest us or shoot us dead if we don’t surrender.”

“What’s your problem? We shoot the damn guard and the damn cameras. We shoot our way out of the bank and the police condone.” From the breast pocket of his shirt he took out a piece of newspaper and a sachet of tobacco, and began rolling a cigar. He improvised a pistol with his fingers. “We’ll shoot, shoot, shoot.” He mimed blowing smoke from the muzzle of his improvisation.

“Have you ever killed before, Alu?”

“No, skunk. I thought I was a damn saint. We need guns.”

“Do you know anyone who can lend us some for an hour or two?”

“If I knew such people I wouldn’t have been a vagabond. A person armed with a gun has the world in his hands, Reggie.”

“What’re you good at? Perhaps we might start from there.”

“I’m romantic. It’s damn unfortunate there’s no woman in my life.”

“Quit thinking women all the time, boy!”

“They make the damn world turn. They control men. Miners go underground to do dangerous work because of women. I know what I’m talking about. When I dropped out of school I went to Johannesburg. I toiled in illegal gold mines for hookers and their gonorrhoea.”

“What work did you do underground?”

“I dug and cleared rubble. I worked with fourteen-pound hammers and chisels. It was backbreaking work. My wages went to whores. I was a damn Aid Agency for prostitutes. God will reward me. Without me, some of the damn hookers wouldn’t have sent their children to school.”

They sat in silence for several minutes; Regis engrossed with the bank, Aluwani occupied with smoking and young women on the pavement. People passed behind them, some silent, some caught in conversations. Cars whizzed past them as if the street was a freeway between cities. Across the street, patrons walked in and out of the bank’s doors. Louvers prevented the two from seeing the interior of the branch.

“This is what we’ll require,” Regis declared at last. “Since we don’t have pistols, we’ll need two knapsack sprayers, two overalls, two pairs of gumboots and goggles, two respirators and at least one gun.”

“Are we talking cotton fumigation or bank robbery here?”

“Keep your voice down, idiot. We’ll need the sprayers.”

“If we worked hard enough we could buy knapsack sprayers, but a gun....”

“My father owned a pistol. He’s dead,” Regis said mournfully. “Pneumonia killed him.”

“He’s dead, so what? How does that give us the damn guns?”

“No one knew what to do with an unregistered pistol he had.”

“Where’re you hiding the pistol?”

“It’s in my father’s grave in Mamelodi. He died while I was in prison.”

“You people are damn Egyptian and crazy! You bury a man with his damn gold and silver!” He shook his head. “How do you know they buried him with the pistol?”

“Close relatives who put it in the coffin told me when I visited the grave.”

“You think it’s still in the goddamn grave?”

“Where’d it go, Alu?”

Aluwani looked perturbed. “You told me about your father. He’s been dead two years now. Can a pistol work after staying that long in shit?”

“We’ll see.”

“Reggie, you’re telling me you’ll dig up the damn pistol?”

“We’ll open my father’s grave and look for the pistol together. We’ll work like Siamese twins from now until we split the loot. Then you’ll go your way while I go mine.”

“Have you ever fired a shot at someone or in the air in anger?”

“That’s not pertinent, Alu.”

“What’s the name of the damn pistol, shithead?”

“It’s a good pistol. The Swiss Army used it from 1900 to 1949.”

Aluwani shrugged his shoulders. “That isn’t a damn name.”

“It’s a Luger or a P00 Parabellum,” Regis said proudly, smiling. “My father stole it from a Swiss he once worked for as a workshop hand in Durban. His employer smuggled the firearm into the country. We’ve too much planning and work to do before we can lay our hands on the millions.”

“If we’re going to use one gun, I’ll be the armed robber, or I’m out.”

“The gun is yours, Alu, if you prove to me you’re a good shooter.”

“How much do you think is in the bank?”

“Millions. Why?”

“Reggie, I want to be damn sure we’ll be rich.”

“How’ll you use your money?”

“That’s none of your damn business, Regis.”

“You’re right. But I’ll urge you to lie low and continue as a vagrant for a week or two.”

“Tell me you’re bluffing, Reggie. I’ve never seen a millionaire who sleeps in the damn open for the sake of lying low. I’ll open a security company and a string of brothels. My eyes want to see naked women. What’ll you do with your damn share?”

“I don’t think you want to know. I’ll bury it for three months.”

“You’re a crazy fool, Regis. How do we use knapsack sprayers to rob a bank?”

“We load them with kerosene, spray the tellers and clients and threaten to set them on fire. The goggles and the respirators will hide our faces. We’ll put the money in the knapsacks and get away.”

Aluwani looked at him with disapproval. “Some experiments are damn dangerous. What do we use the shitty Luger for? How do we run in gumboots?”

“We’ll shoot the guard and the cameras and daredevils who might try to stop us.”

“We need a better plan, Regis. There’s neither strain nor bloodshed in a perfect robbery.”

“What’re you thinking then?”

“I think you’re damn foolish and suicidal and trigger happy. You’ve chartered a flight to Hell, Regis. How did you become my damn buddy? You’ve no soul though you look like a suffering pastor.”

Regis stared at the bank. “We’ll rob the bank one way or the other.”

Chapter 17

It was a large amount.

The hour dusk, a purple sash around his neck forgotten over his grey suit, Father Hendrik van Vuuren gloated at the stack on his desk in his cathedral office. He sat motionless in an armchair, meditative, quietly asking God if he hadn't erred by accepting the amount, but frequently trying to arm-twist Him that it was a normal practice for priests to receive gifts in homage to their office.

The stack was tall. His estimate was that it was enough to buy him a luxurious house in Pretoria or Johannesburg, and a fleet of immaculate cars. Four days after accepting the money from the premier, the amount remained undetermined. The priest hadn't counted it due to the guilt he felt in his heart. By accepting the money, he realised he had been cynical to the point of breaking his vow of poverty.

At his ordination, an archbishop and a cardinal, both guests of honour at the ceremony, made it categorically clear that once one vow was breached the other two; in his case that of chastity and marriage to Christ, were rendered ineffective. The men likened a Catholic priest to a scooter. Two vows were incapable of propping a Catholic priest as a righteous man of God worth representing Him.

The afterthought that the Devil had ensnared him gnawed his senses. Despite the premier's seeming sincerity and apparent generosity, he was convinced the politician was somehow buying his allegiance for one reason or the other, though he found it difficult to doubt Moagi Makgunda's commitment to the Church and his welfare as a priest.

What would he use the money for? The fact that he neither told anyone about the gift nor handed it over to the parish treasurer deemed him selfish and ungodly. He wasn't going to surrender it to the church's coffers as was his custom with other gifts. Despite the self-condemnation, he couldn't imagine himself surrendering the

money, re-ushering himself to a frugal, priestly life of sorrow and solitude.

He wouldn't make a fuss of it. If it was bidden that he would shepherd his flock through the gates of Heaven, it would be so despite what he, a man, felt inside him. For forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert. For forty solid years they were smitten, yet those meant to enter Canaan entered it, and Moses, in spite of his overt efforts, didn't set foot on the Promised Land.

Man is never righteous; he thought as he reached the stack of hundred-dollar bills and fingered it. It's the righteousness of God and His grace that veil believers and usher them into eternal life. The righteousness of God veils Man for his justification.

The priest continued to brood carnally, offending himself, but resolute that money revolved the world and nothing happened by chance. If Judas had declined the pieces of silver, no man would've been saved today. Money from European and Colombian drug lords, declared pederasts, suspected Satanists and warmongers indirectly funded UNESCO, UNICEF, the Red Cross and many humanitarian relief organisations throughout the world.

He, Hendrik van Vuuren, was neither a felon nor a Satanist. Why would he scrutinise his life over a gift instead of thanking his God for noticing his avowed poverty and prompting a resourceful man to squash it? Didn't Apostle Paul write to the Corinthians that the Messiah was made poor for Man to be rich? Who was Hendrik to try and defy a biblical fact?

His relationship with the premier wasn't improper in any way. If the politician was a sinner and the origins of the money sinful, it wouldn't deem their relationship scandalous; sin was the *raison d'être* of his priesthood. When Mary Magdalene poured the perfume of spikenard over the Saviour who obviously knew she had bought it from the proceeds of harlotry, Jesus neither condemned her nor the anointing.

As was his custom from engrained habit, he knew he had to pray to exorcise himself from self-condemnation and the mental quandary he found himself in. God had the mercy to exonerate him if at all his acceptance of the money was sinful. The Creator would tell him what

to do with the amount for the sake of his salvation and the glorification of Christ's name.

If the Lord directed him to hand it to the treasurer, put it to his own use or hand it over to a charity organisation, he would be obliged to follow the dictates of Heaven. But God had never instructed him before. He was ignorant of his Master's voice.

Before he knelt in prayer at the altar, Father Hendrik van Vuuren locked the money in a topmost drawer in his desk, rose, yawned and exited the office for a breather. He couldn't stash the money in the church's safe in a passage; the parish treasurer had spare keys to the safe and might see the amount. Outdoor air was fresh, the sky starry and the evening mystifying with its distant cries of nocturnal birds as if Pretoria were a wilderness.

He locked the door, double checked if indeed it was locked, and strolled along a paved footpath meandering through the extensive flower gardens around the cathedral. The far fringes of the sky were gloomy with gathering clouds, distant but closing in, and the night darkened as the evening wore on. A storm was brewing, promising to further mar the birdsong serenity of the evening already blemished by pagan drumbeat in the distance.

Prejudicially, he thought the fiery clouds harboured foreboding and desolation. But Father Van Vuuren dismissed the conclusion as African, childish and baseless, the straining of an idle mind.

The distant drumbeat and ululation tarnished the uncoordinated orchestra of birds. He suspected strongly that some of his parishioners took part in pagan dances and rituals to which drums and ancestral spirits were central. Experience told him many Africans were inseparable from ancestral worship. They revered their dead ancestors more than God. Parishioners often came to the confessional booth to denounce themselves and seek ablution for taking part in night-long pagan rituals.

Some of the congregants confessed ancestral worship twice a year. These people often rushed to receive communion ahead of others and volunteered to perform janitor work at the cathedral. The priest prayed God would be merciless with them on Judgment Day. Hon. Moagi Makgunda wasn't among the hypocrites. Looking back,

the priest realised that the politician had never presented himself before him in the confessional booth.

Light from strategic lampposts and the windows of the rectory and the cathedral brilliantly lit the gardens. At times stopping to touch a rosebud, at times walking erect and loudly inhaling to catch a fragrance, he strolled slowly, marvelling endlessly at God's artistry evident in the sky with its dazzling constellations, in the cries of birds, the myriad of flowers around him, and various other things his mind wouldn't exhaust or attempt to enumerate.

Near the gate to the church lay his favourite flowerbed, a small garden measuring about one by four metres. In it grew no other flowers but roses, mostly Floribunda varieties and some perpetually budding types from the Chinese family of roses. The bed was a mute usher that welcomed visitors and parishioners to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart.

In the light, he made out the Eugenie Guinosseau, Madame Delaroche Lambert and Salet roses distinct with their sticking blooms of pink, purple and scarlet. Life was good. He squatted on his hunches and felt some large Cerimagenta blooms that had faded to lilac-mauve. Alongside his faith, this flowerbed was his immediate concern.

He loved flowers and had an intimate knowledge of them. Intern nuns who visited from mostly Italy, Ireland and Australia, and flower aficionados in the parish tasked with decorating the cathedral, had taught him many things about flowers. But he made them realise the parishioners and the visitors themselves were the real flowers.

After pruning cankerous leaves and sepals, he resolved to revisit the bed in the morning lest he would do a shoddy job of it in the artificial light. A stone-flagged path took him to a pergola with a double-row of stone pillars linked with horizontal timber beams from which flowers in vases hung. Rambler and climbing roses, among other creepers, partially covered the two-metre high pillars and the three-metre long beams linking them. On the structure, the dominate blooms were pink and marginally flanked with scarlet. A rock boulder on a manicured patch of lawn was the only feature in the pergola.

He sat on the rock and pondered his position as a white priest in the depths of Africa, a continent still barbaric despite having embraced education and Christianity. The inventive shrills and frills of the country's cities and towns blinded visitors to the barbarian inclinations of many native South Africans. Was the premier among the pagans in his fold? Was he, Father Van Vuuren himself, doing sterling work for the salvation of African souls?

As a man of God, he had given his calling everything and fasted innumerable times for his parishioners, but it appeared it was to no avail. From the confessions he presided over, he knew that the parishioners hated and bewitched each other and only came to church on Sunday to keep up appearances and partake of communion as stipulated in the Bible. Of course he was a ray of light in Dark Africa, but he wondered ceaselessly if the Catholic Faith could completely tame an African, or the Faith itself with its unsound policies on contraception, abortion and intolerance to ordain female priests, needed taming instead.

From the dictate of habit, he quietly recited the rosary in an act of contrition. The stray thought that the Faith Jesus bled for, that crux for Mankind's justification and righteousness, needed taming was anti-Christ. He prayed, making peace with God, the beads of the rosary shifting between his fingers. Ten minutes later he adjusted his priestly collar and made his way to the cathedral, unlocked a side door and entered.

Once in the house of the Lord, he guarded against blasphemous thoughts. By the altar he genuflected thrice and knelt, making the Sign of the Cross, his eyes on a bunch of red roses in a golden pedestal vase gracing the altar. He had hand-picked and arranged the roses himself in the morning.

"Dear Jesus," he prayed, "Help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with your Spirit and Life. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that my life may only be a radiance of You. Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my spirit. Let them look up and see no longer me, but only You, Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine, as to be a light to others; the

Light of Jesus will all be from You. None of it will be mine. It shall be You shining on others not me. Let me preach You without preaching by words, but by my example, by the catching force of the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to You. Amen.” It was Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman’s prayer. Father Van Vuuren meant every word of it, or thought he did.

In a prayer posture he remained; he had set out to ask God’s counsel on the unspecified amount, instead he had begged to be a beckon that emitted Divine Light. Immediately reason confronted him. How could he ask the Lord what to do with the money as if he had other options being someone avowed to poverty? Wasn’t it expedient to present the money to the church or some charity organisation?

If he must pray regarding the money, it would be divine and logical to invite the Almighty to help him choose between the church coffers and charity. Father Van Vuuren remembered the fate Ananias and his wife suffered when they tempted God, and rebuked himself. Notwithstanding his calling, he had remained a fallible man, and, as a priest, an eye-sore to God.

Vinegary within, he crossed himself and rose. He should’ve been something else not a priest. Nowhere in his entire life did he remember God ever calling him to the altar. His priesthood stemmed from a need for an occupation. The world had priests subpoenaed by dreams, visions and events. He wasn’t one of them. The God he called to in prayer wasn’t the same one biblical prophets conversed with. Father Van Vuuren felt bad; unlike Prophet Elijah and the others, verily he was a man, not a representative of the Most High.

After he genuflected more out of habit than conviction, the priest turned to leave the altar, but sudden banging on the main doors startled him. This wasn’t someone who had come to dump a child in the atrium. Shouting across the gallery to find out who it was would be downright undignified and ungodly. This being banging, not a wolverine cry, he made his way down the main aisle, the rapping intermittent and almost violent.

Chapter 18

When Father Van Vuuren placed his hand on a doorknob in one of the cathedral's portal doors, a familiar voice reached him.

"Father Van Vuuren?" it was Lerato's voice.

"It is I, my child," he shouted at the door. "Are you in trouble?"

"It's Mrs Makgunda. Please let me in. I need to talk to you."

He unlocked the door and opened it. Mrs Lerato Makgunda stood alone in the atrium. Her face cosmetic-free, she was as plain as a pikestaff. Silently, he prayed she wasn't making a surreptitious visit on some pretence when in actuality she wanted to tempt him into sin. Her husband had lain bedridden for quite some time now. Desire might be upon her.

The Devil was a cunning deceiver. One had to be on guard all the time. Many parish women, many beautiful from many angles, many of whom he fancied, had tried to seduce him from as far back as he remembered. The frailty to succumb was in him as it was in all men, but he had asked God for the grace to stand by his vows. He was a man, a bundle of sexually desirous feelings, though his desire lay dormant in him.

Father Van Vuuren stood aside to let her in, appraising her at the same time in an attempt to detect what impelled her visit. She appeared shaken though physically she was unflustered, and her entry had an air of haste. In a long-sleeved floral chiffon blouse and floor-sweeping matching skirt, everything on her; from her hairstyle to her shoes, was commonplace. Her figure was still on the lean side, and stunning in a way. Her attire betrayed her as a countrified woman. Distinctly on her were signs that in her former years she was a succinct paragon of beauty.

"What brings you here, my child, after sunset?" He glanced at his wristwatch. "What devils chase?"

"We need to sit down, Father."

He left the door open. "You shouldn't have come alone to meet me. Ethics forbid it. Our actions should be beyond reproach all the time."

"I'm sorry, Father, but I didn't think it was necessary to find a nun or deaconess to accompany me. There's no time."

Before closing the door and locking it, the priest looked outside. "Many priests have fallen this way. In Egypt it wasn't Potiphar's wife who started everything, but seclusion with a woman. A man and a woman mustn't be alone in the same room. God deliver us from temptation and wrong interpretations."

He led her to his office, the sound of her footsteps attesting to her following him. Though he walked without looking over his shoulders, he was sure she was timid and frightened judging from her arrhythmic footfalls. He suspected she was stopping to check behind her. Erect, his gaiety that of a man on top of the situation, he walked, which was in accordance with the priestly grooming he had at the seminary. If he lacked confidence and exuded fear under any circumstances, his sheep would shake and scatter.

In his office, he gestured at a visitor's chair and sat in his swivel armchair. "We aren't in the confessional. Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?"

"No. Thank you."

"What can I do for you, my child?" His mind locked on her husband. His bedside priestly prayers had failed to raise the man from his sickbed. "Have you finally come to receive prayers on behalf of your husband?"

"I want you to pray for me, Father." She sat with her shoulders hunched.

She had never been inside his office. He saw it from her eyes roving on the religious effects on his polished desk; crosses, crucifixes, bottles of unction, a stone carving of hands clasped in prayer and a glass menagerie of the Madonna holding the Holy Child, Jesus on a donkey and Jesus receiving baptism, and a caricature of the Ten Commandments. The desk was a shrine of some sort. "What do I ask God to do for you, my child?"

She looked up from the artefacts on the desk. "It might sound absurd, but of late I've had terminal feelings and experienced weird dreams. Of death and devils I've dreamed. The culmination is an urge inside me to receive a final prayer from you. I cannot exit this world without a send-off from you, Father Van Vuuren. I suppose there's a stipulated prayer for passage into the hereafter."

"If this request was coming from your husband I'd understand. Are you considering suicide, Mrs Makgunda?"

"My husband won't rise from that bed. There's a pattern of death in the family. The Makgundas are concluded."

The words ransacked his senses. "You talk as if you're the Devil's mouthpiece. You're not his advocate. Neither are you at liberty to make reckless utterances. Believe in the power that raised Christ from the dead. Believing otherwise is futile and anti-Christ. Ask your godfather to give you a recap of the basics of our Faith."

"The liturgy of the Word, the Apostles' creed and the profession of our Catholic Faith are on my fingertips. I'm not denouncing Catholicism. I'm confirming my belief in it before I die. I've sinned in my thoughts and in my deeds. I've sinned by commission and omission. Pray for me, Father Van Vuuren, I beg you."

"This is drama in bad taste, I'm afraid. We've all sinned through our own faults, in our words, in what we've done and what we've failed to do. Isn't that what we say when we strike our breasts in Eucharist prayer?"

"It is, Father. I don't know how to express it, but something has cornered me. My feelings and dreams don't lie. I hope I'm not sounding insane."

"Indeed you are, my child. Celebrate the mystery of Christ's love, acknowledge your failures and ask the Lord for pardon and strength." It surprised him he was articulate under the oddity of the circumstances; alone with her in his office and Lerato talking as if she were a caricature of herself.

For a moment they sat in silence, her eyes glowing at him in anger.

"Ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints to pray for you in your dark hour of stress, pain and confusion. Ask the

Father for forgiveness. He's full of gentleness and compassion. He'll show you a passage out of your unsettling dreams and feelings."

"I insist you pray for me, Father. For that reason alone I've come. I don't see myself alive beyond this day."

He picked a silver crucifix and toyed with it. "It is written: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me.*"

"It is also written: *It is appointed unto every man once to die.*"

"The Devil has duped you into preparing for your own death. He has dragged you into his stable of unbelief and frustration. Forsake your feelings and live. Unbelief is a sin punishable by death."

She drew her chair back and rose abruptly. "I was specific in my request," her tone was sardonic. "I don't see why you're giving me sermons. When will you discern with the spirit?"

The incongruity of her tone obscurely shook him. If he had his way, he would've rebuked her and dragged her screaming and kicking out of his office. Her eyes had a frightening twinkle. For a moment he thought she was going to attack him or tip his desk and spill the miniatures on it.

"Since you insist, I'll pray for you, my child. Sit down, Mrs Makgunda. Don't do things you'd regret tomorrow." Dignity and an expected fear of God coldly curbed him from exploding.

"The hour draws. For me tomorrow shall never come."

He gestured at the chair behind her. "I asked you to sit down, my child. I can't idle while the Evil One takes possession of you. Won't you listen to your father's voice?"

She sank in the chair. "Father, I've reached a dead end."

Though psychology wasn't his province, judging by the seriousness in her eyes, he didn't doubt that she believed she had reached the end of her tether. "You're prophesying death over your life. Beware the Devil can capitalise on your words." Leaning forward, he held her hands in his over the desk and prayed in a soothing voice, his eyes open. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was

crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead and rose again on the third day. He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He'll come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. I believe—”

Lerato jerked her hands free and sighed in exasperation. “What kind of a father gives his child a scorpion when she asked for bread?”

“Calm down. You're not going to die, Mrs Makgunda. Your request is most unusual. We believe in Christ, not in our dreams.” Forcibly, he took her hands in his again and continued in prayer. “Father, tomorrow, when she rises from her bed, we'll honour Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, our Lord and God. Tomorrow, as the sun rises and she looks back at the folly of Satan's trappings, we'll honour Joseph, the apostles and martyrs Peter, and Paul, Andrew, James, John and all the saints. May their merits and prayers gain her Your constant help and protection through Christ our Lord. Amen.” From the desk he picked a corked unction bottle, went round to her and sanctified her with drops to her hair and forehead saying: “Father, grant her Your peace in this life. Save her from final damnation and count her among those You've chosen. It is our duty and salvation always and everywhere to give You thanks. Amen.” Unhurried and purposeful, he returned to his chair and sat down.

Father Van Vuuren hated administering unction, which he prepared himself and knew to be mere tap water devoid of the passionate influence of the Holy Ghost. Throughout his priesthood he had never seen the water raise a believer from a sickbed, heal or relieve anyone of signs and symptoms of disease. The water was so powerless that it had never perturbed any demon into manifesting.

From the beginning of their meeting until now, words had gushed mechanically from him. He had assured her with scriptures he hardly believed in. Now he had no further ritual to perform or words to pacify her with. If his mendacious act had no effect on her, at least from a psychological perspective, he saw nothing he could do. Because dismissing her would be rude and ungodly, he stared at her, his eyes telling her he was done.

“Goodbye, Father Van Vuuren. Tell everyone tomorrow that I knew.”

Both stood up and shook hands mechanically.

“How’ll you go home, Mrs Makgunda?”

“A taxi is waiting for me outside. Thank you, Father, though I didn’t get what I really asked for.”

“Heaven sags with compassion, my child. If a daughter asks her father for a live scorpion, should the father go ahead and give her? Go and rest, Mrs Makgunda.”

He led her out of the office and the cathedral through the side door.

Outside it was now dark, the sky was devoid of the stars; the smudge of clouds had blocked them. Since it was common civility to see people to the gate, especially a frightened and vulnerable female parishioner, Father Van Vuuren decided to accompany a sullen Lerato to the double wrought-iron gate so that he would lock it and retire to the rectory. He pretended to take no notice of her surly countenance. They walked in total silence like apparitions in a well-maintained cemetery.

At the gate, he bowed slightly at her, a dismissive routine. “The grace and the peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you,” he said in his primmest voice, glad of her riddance.

She walked out through the gate tacit and in haste, a dramatic display of her annoyance and intolerance. Across Bosman St stood a yellow taxi, the cabman reading a newspaper behind the wheel. Sparse vehicular traffic was on the two-way tarmac. Scores of evening strollers were on the pavements on both sides of the road. Father Van Vuuren watched her go, resolved to inform the diocesan bishop of her absurd request, and learn what the learned and venerated man would’ve done under the circumstances.

He was closing one gate, a handiwork of trellis, when he heard a screech of tyres, looked up and saw a dark sedan Nissan Qashqai parked about forty metres behind the taxi. Father Van Vuuren saw the Nissan lunge at tremendous speed from the edge of the road, veer and straddle the dotted marks of the carriageway and growl towards Mrs Lerato Makgunda. It happened in a flash. She was on

the broken line when she heard the screech and saw the car coming. Panic and a moment of indecision rooted her in the middle of the road, her hands desperately and vainly out-stretched, a half-formed scream clogged in her gapping mouth. The Nissan Qashqai hit her squarely with its grille.

Many people screamed in shock. She sprung into the air like a springbok, but seemed to make a foetal curl and summersault. The car rocketed underneath her, but not before it hit her again with its windscreen. Her legs and head ploughed through its roof and formed a deep furrow in it as if metal had hit against metal. The second impact spun her in mid-air. As the sedan accelerated, she seemed to float in the air for some seconds and then she came down, landed headfirst on the tarmac and sprawled in an awkward posture, motionless as a mannequin.

Her skirt, torn on impact, had dropped to her knees, exposing her nylon panties. The garments were turning scarlet under a streetlamp. The car neither slowed down nor stopped. When Father Van Vuuren pried his eyes from Lerato's still form and glanced in the direction the car had taken, the sedan had become a receding, overtaking blob on the road. At the second intersection, it swerved and made a right turn at top speed, vanishing into Visagie St. Stunned silence ensued momentarily.

Father Van Vuuren rushed and knelt beside Lerato, so did the taxi driver and a knot of men from the pavements. He wanted to feel her neck for a pulse, but the attempt became a half-formulated gesture. His arms froze as he realised her head had cracked open. Grey matter in her cranium was showing; some of it splashed on the tarmac like small clusters of noodles. The priest blinked several times. Sweat invaded his brow and the tip of his nose.

Her legs had fractured in many places. Her shoes were several metres from the point of impact in the direction the car had taken. She lay amid glittering shards of a shattered windscreen and grille fragments. His eyes riveted on her injuries. Her head looked like that of a cow pole-axed by an amateur. Helpless frustration and a sense of loss swept him.

Some people watching from a distance shouted appeals to others to call 911. As voices declared her dead and cursed the motorist, Father Van Vuuren shook his head and stood up. Tears stood in his eyes, dammed and rolled down his cheeks. He looked away from her body.

It wasn't the unsightly injuries that repulsed him, but strings of mediumistic red and blue beads wound on her waistline. Frustration and a sense of loss gave way to rancour and fury. The more he looked at the beads, the more they embittered him. Wishing someone covered her indecent exposure, he gloated at the beads. They were proof of her intimacy with ancestors—proof of her reverence of dead people. In retrospect, he saw that it was the Devil that had spurred her to treat him cavalierly.

"She was a seer," a man remarked at the beads, stepping back. "No ordinary person wears those."

"Does anyone know her?" enquired another male voice.

"She came from the cathedral," answered another man. "The priest should know her."

Father Van Vuuren bowed his head. He didn't want to be associated with her; not when the evidence of her unbelief was there for everyone to see. The finding unnerved him. He saw her entire body as a talisman. She was right when she suggested it was time he discerned matters spiritually: *When will you discern with the spirit?* The question haunted him. But he couldn't afford to turn his back on her corpse and walk away. She had been right.

Had God endowed him with spiritual discernment, he wouldn't have administered unction on her, but he would've told her to approach the ancestral devil that informed her of her imminent death to perform the sepulchral rites she demanded.

How many people in the parish were of the same satanic penchant as Lerato? How many of them were competent believers? When he conducted Mass in his splendid robes, how many of his congregants saw him as a clown?

His mind raced in cul-de-sacs. This was no accident. Who had killed her and why? Did her prime suspect, Hon. Moagi Makgunda, have a hand in the murder? Guilt and confusion checked him. She

was a *seer*, he thought, and a hypocrite. But she'd seen it coming. My sermons to these faggots are rain wasted on a graveyard!

The scene soon teemed with curious onlookers and wailing police cars.

Chapter 19

The feminine figure covered from head to toe in a dark burqa stepped on the accelerator of the damaged Nissan Qashqai. Apart from the figure's hands, the garment covered the whole body. The wearer could be let through a Taliban roadblock as a *Shari'a*-adhering woman. But close scrutiny of the hands would reveal a facetious indulgence. The hands were light in complexion, venous, hairy and thick. The knuckles were dark patches, the knuckles of a man who did press-ups on sand, broken stones and hard surfaces.

The smell of burnt rubber pervaded the interior, but air gushing into the vehicle dissipated it in no time. The smell of tyres didn't worry the motorist. His worry was that the damage to the front of the vehicle might've extended to the radiator. He feared the car would overheat and stall. If the vehicle stalled there would be a massacre if people tried to stop him.

The rear view mirrors told him no one was on his trail, at least not as yet. Three turns later, he slowed down to avoid attracting the undue attention of traffic police officers, and resorted to sanitary lanes that took him to the western fringes of the city.

Then it began to rain, a censorious downpour that soaked him and reduced his visibility drastically. A hidden merit came with the storm. He saw for only a few metres ahead. The same applied to everybody in the downpour, which increased his chances of sneaking away undetected.

The Nissan Qashqai attracted curious attention and sympathy from fellow motorists in slow-moving on-coming traffic. The roof was curved in and there were peripheral, stubborn shards where the windscreen had been, and rain lashed an *Islamic woman* on the wheel.

If the authorities stopped him for whatever reason, he was going to shoot. A Colt M1911, the longest serving pistol of the USA, rested within arm's reach on the front passenger seat. Tucked in his belt was

a semi-automatic Smith & Wesson .45 Model CS45. Though he felt like an army, he wasn't going to risk it just because he was armed.

It darkened and rained in slates. Nobody paid particular attention to the car when he switched on the headlights, now cross-eyed, and drove westwards along Church St. There was a trifle irony in his choice of the road. He, a hardened assassin, was driving a getaway car, doubtlessly smeared with the blood and flesh of a victim, along an aptly named road that reminded the city's citizens of the cluster of pioneering churches in Pretoria—for their salvation. The city's founding fathers were passive evangelists who wanted the people to shun sin, he thought.

The impact had been violent. He saw Lerato springing into the air, smashing into the windscreen, and heard her body forging a furrow in the roof of the car. No doubt he had killed her. Had he shot her through the head or chest as she left the cathedral, it would've been ruled a downright assassination. Fatal hit-and-run accidents were a common occurrence in South Africa. His principal would be happy.

The western fringes of Pretoria were the closest to the city's CBD. Avoiding a freeway, he turned into a dirt road snaking through rolling commercial farmland. The road was muddy, wheel-mottled and almost impassable in many water-logged places. But he drove along, the car leaving tracks in its wake. The farmland gave way to bush and then hills and a forest.

When he reached warning signs informing him that he was about to drive past the National Nuclear Research Station and stopping was prohibited, he turned the Nissan Qashqai into a northern primitive track and drove towards the small settlement of Hennopsrivier. The storm thinned, fizzled and died.

When he was about ten kilometres shy of the settlement, he steered the car onto an overgrown track that took him to a secluded bank on the Hennops River. He was glad that from the moment he left the freeway and drove through farmlands until now, he had encountered no one, neither pedestrian nor motorist.

César Miguel tactfully wriggled out of the burqa. Beneath the garb were a hugging muscle-mania grey T-shirt and a pair of black

leather trousers. Using his hands, he rearranged his wet, tousled hair and thought he had looked ridiculous in feminine Islamic garb. Ahead on the edge of the river, a Dutch house appeared, uninhabited and anomalous. The house was perhaps a hunters' lodge or a resting haven for fishermen in its heyday.

As he had expected, no one was in sight and there was no sign of human habitation. Without a windowpane intact, the house was falling apart from decades of neglect. Trees grew out of some windows. The walls were cracked and threatened to crumble. When he initially came to the house at scouting stage two days previously, it struck him as a structure that would inspire horror-movie writers.

Now drenched and driving at a snail's pace, he edged the car into an open, built-in garage and stopped when he crashed into three empty drums on a small stack of bricks. Everything was going according to plan.

Leaving the headlamps on and the burqa in the car, César turned the engine off, took the Colt .45 on the seat and got out of the vehicle. The silence that followed created a palpable vacuum in his ears. Water dripped from his clothes. The T-shirt clung to his body.

The damage on the roof tempted him to inspect the frontal damage on the car, but he refrained from doing so. It was pointless and he was in a hurry. If he were caught, the hazards of the profession, incarceration or death by hanging, beckoned. He had done a thorough job of killing her; he mused to himself, and guessed that ironically he had been as thorough as Christ when He cursed the Fig tree. Upon passing near the tree on the second leg of His religious errand, the Lord wouldn't have inspected the damage had it not been for a disciple who brought it to his attention.

Much of his inspiration came from the Bhagavad-Gita, the Holy Bible and historic godly figureheads. More practically, he derived it from years of bullfighting in his capacity as a picador. As a front-page picador, back in his days in Spain, he had put his neck on the block for several matadors. He deemed himself braver than the bullfighters who got all the acclaim at the end of every fight.

In Spain, he was responsible for draining the bulls of their strength and checking their 'hooking' tendencies, which translated to

facing them on horseback in their blind fury and when they were still fit, strong and vying to gore him and his beast. Never in his experience of bullfighting did he see a matador verify if a bull was dead before he made the victorious bow to the spectators.

In a corner of the garage stood items he had hidden earlier that day—a five-litre petrol container and a candle. The latter was used and barely four centimetres tall. The items were behind a length of asbestos sheet barricading the corner.

Like someone working at his leisure in his vegetable garden, he whistled *La Marcha Real*, the Spanish National Anthem, as he doused the interior and exterior of the Nissan Qashqai with petrol. Then he poured the remnants of the liquid into a line that ended in the broken parquet floor of the door-less living room of the house. Grass, gooseberries and thorny bushes grew in the room.

The light from the headlights partially lit the room, enabling him to see what he was doing and where he was stepping. At the tip of the line, he placed the candle stub and carefully lit it with a cigarette lighter. The candle's flame burned erect and unwavering; no gushes of wind disturbed it. He looked at the burning candle in relation to the plants in the room, and was satisfied that they wouldn't catch the fire before the candle burned to the floorboards, ignited the inflammable line and torched the car. Returning to the car, he switched the lights off, plunging the house in semi-darkness. The candlelight in the lounge dimly lit a section of the garage.

Chapter 20

César Sergio Miguel stepped out of the riverside house, the Colt .45 and a torch in his hands. Listening, he discerned no threats except the distant cry of birds and animals, perhaps jackals and hyenas, he wasn't sure and he didn't care. Wildlife wouldn't be a match to a predatory man of his calibre. He walked into the night, a labyrinth of footpaths taking him away from the house and the river, the torch illuminating his way.

A sweet smell of decaying vegetation and damp soil tried to speak to him of an earthly life of romance and peace. He denied nature a chance to coerce his senses; he was an assassin, a candidate of perdition, there were no two ways about it.

After some time, wind-drifting country music reached his ears and he stepped onto a gravel road. From here he jogged to dry his clothes, especially the T-shirt. His trousers being tanned and polished leather, it hadn't absorbed much rain. The road curved eastwards towards Hennops River, but downstream to the desolate house. After about twenty minutes his T-shirt was dry and the road had taken him to a sleepy riverside resort with a florescent signboard that read:

WHY-NOT

HIDEOUT INN

See no evil, hear no evil

The country music emanated from the tree-obsured inn. Beyond the inn, he discerned rapid splashes of the Hennops River as it flowed towards the Reitlvlei Dam some thirty or so kilometres downstream. The concentration of noisy rapids at this stretch of the river was the inn's prime attraction, aside from its remoteness that lured prostitutes and adulterers and all manner of shrewd patrons.

César Miguel liked the inn's *bear-no-evil* and *see-no-evil* policy. Patrons were free to use pseudonyms on checking in. Nobody was

asked to identify themselves formerly. As such, the place was notorious for refusing to cooperate with the police in instances when the management was asked to do so, usually following the commission of violent robberies in the vicinity, or when they suspected the inn harboured felons.

Using a handkerchief, he bent and quickly wiped dirt from his shoes, and walked through the gates of the establishment. Couples were fondling, kissing or roasting meat on charcoal grills in the resort's dimly-lit gardens. Nobody took an interest in him and he was disinterested in the patrons too. At the resort either a man brought his own company or he would be comfortless for the duration of his stay. Attempting to find a woman among possible felons and fugitives often resulted in gun battles and death.

He stowed away the torch and the pistol, descended some rocky steps and vanished through an archway by-passing the reception. The inn resembled a stonework medieval castle. Decorative artefacts on its walls reminded patrons of the Anglo-Boer War, the pioneer column, Paul Kruger and Cecil John Rhodes.

From the archway, he stepped into a bar with a handful of patrons, but the air was thick with cigarette smoke. A jukebox belted the country music. Light dragon tattoos on his arms, cheeks and forehead, he was at home among the dishonourable patrons.

Two men in leather vests played snooker. The atmosphere was lethargic. Through a window he saw a section of the parking area. His Harley-Davidson, the Sportster Forty-Eight, distinct and glistening under a security lamp, stood between two cars, his helmet strapped on a handlebar. He bought a double-tot of gin and tonic, gulped it in a flash standing, belched, bought another one and sat on a stool by the counter.

Through the same window, he looked at the sky above the distant and relief-obstructed desolate house by the river. It was now lit. Gloomy clouds above the house seemed to shift and gyrate in tumultuous movements. César knew he was on the brink of making more money than the premier had promised him, and he would return to Madrid rich. In the bars of Palacio Gaviria, Santceledoni and Planet Hollywood Madrid, women would fall at his feet.

Chapter 21

When South Africa Airways Boeing 747-400 flight 605 approached Johannesburg shortly before the crack of dawn and circled the city once, presumably the pilots acting on instructions from the control tower, Heidi Gaynor had an appreciation of what to expect in the sprawling major city she hoped to frequent from Pretoria.

As the plane circled, a middle-aged African passenger sitting next to her, a woman in her mid-forties she had befriended; pointed at a huddle of distant lights. “That’s Pretoria were you’re going. Below us is Johannesburg. Joburg is popularly known as Egoli—the City of Gold.”

“The cities look splendid from the sky,” she said with forced excitement. She was tired, having sat on three interconnecting planes for a total of seventeen hours.

The notice to travel from London had been short and inconveniencing. Within the two-day time frame she was suppose to fly, Mr Scott Randall, now her agent, failed to book her on a direct flight to Johannesburg. Much of her baggage on a different plane heading to her destination but via Tel Aviv, British Airways took her to a Cairo airport bustling with jubilant tourists, where, after loitering and squatting for four hours in a terminal, a QANTAS flight took her to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. Three hours after landing and a forlorn occupation of nail-polishing and reflection, SAA flight 605, en route to South Africa from Mumbai, had a vacant seat urgently arranged for her by a South African diplomat stationed in Addis Ababa according to the briefing of a very apologetic air hostess specially assigned to see that she was comfortable.

“Those lights down there are the West Rand towns of Krugersdorp and Roodepoort,” the woman was saying. “The other side, that’s the East Rand towns of Germiston, Boksburg, Springs and Benoni.”

“It appears Joburg is highly urbanised.”

“It’s the gold capital of the world, my dear,” she said pompously.

“Why is there no airport in Pretoria?”

“There are a number of small airports for domestic flights. Pretoria is the administrative centre of South Africa. It’s a mere fifty kilometres from Johannesburg.”

From the sky, it seemed a mere shanghai-shot separated Pretoria and Johannesburg.

The plane touched down at Johannesburg International Airport and surrendered its cargo and passengers to the rituals of SA’s Department of Migration and Taxes. The airport was pristine; its tiled floors smelled of disinfectant, the walls were hyacinth-blue; railings were scum-free, windows sparkling-clean and the airport personnel immaculate in their navy-blue uniforms. Armed policemen milled about. The atmosphere was secure and professional and the baggage reclamation system efficient. Who said clumsy baboons manned offices and civil amenities in Africa?

Her passport stamped, she hugged the woman who had felt obliged to be her free flight tour guide. The woman wished her good health and prosperity. She was motherly and a far-cry from the surly, conservative personalities of Britain.

“You look shocked,” the woman remarked, smiling.

“Yea,” Heidi said quietly. “I come from a reserved society.” She cast her eyes down. “I grew up unwanted. I was abused as a child. It feels weird when someone expresses love and concern towards me.” She raised her head like someone coming to her senses. “Oh, my God! I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. Never mind, ma’am.”

The woman put a reassuring hand on Heidi’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. Take it as a phase you’d to go through in life. Whatever you went through made you wiser. I wish you happiness, my girl.”

Heidi shed some tears. “You’re very kind.”

The woman hugged her again and wiped Heidi’s tears with tissue paper from her purse. Moments later the woman’s tears splattered on the tiles between them. “I was also abused in my childhood. A close relative stole my innocence. We live among rogues and perverts.” She wiped her own tears.

For some minutes, they talked about their lives, God and hope, exchanged some email addresses, hugged again and walked hand-in-hand like mother and daughter, both dragging wheeled traveller's bags with their free hands. In the terminal's foyer, where porters and taxi drivers formed a barrier as they jostled for customers, they emphasised the need to keep in touch and parted ways when Heidi spotted a uniformed chauffeur holding a placard written "HG". The man was stately. He stood near one of several police officers keeping an eye on the haranguing porters and taxi drivers.

As per instruction emailed to her, she approached the man and stared at him. Grey splashes blemished the close-cropped, well-brushed horse-shoe margin of his hair showing under his cap. In a white uniform and a cap, clothing that could pass him as a marine navigator, the man stood apart from the taxi drivers and porters.

"Miss Heidi Gaynor," the man said in a guttural voice and the maladroit tone of a man not given to speaking English on a daily basis. His voice was a trifle above the noise of the jostlers.

"Heidi," she said touching her breast emphatically.

He touched his cap respectfully. "I was assigned to drive you to Randlord Mansion," the chauffeur said. "My name is Seidu Amissah. You can call me Seidu. I hope your flight was pleasant." He took over her bag. "Is this your only bag, ma'am?"

"My baggage was put on a different flight in London."

"I'll come for it tomorrow. Meantime I must take you to Wonderboom in Pretoria. You need to rest." He led her down a long corridor. "Welcome to South Africa, Miss Heidi. Welcome to the Rainbow Nation."

They shook hands. Seidu folded the placard and threw it in a refuse bin. His English was British and perfect and he spoke sententiously. Contrary to what she had imagined in Europe; that she was flying to a realm of barbarians, if the man before her was a yardstick for the generality of South Africans, then they were civil enough to fit in any society in the First World.

"Please call me Heidi. The *miss* thing is too formal for me. I tried to enjoy the *flights*, Seidu, but I idled a lot between them."

"I'm sorry. The comfort awaiting you in Wonderboom and the hospitality of the people of this country will compensate for the sad patches."

"*Seidu Amissah*," she said reflectively. "Your name doesn't sound South African. I did a bit of research on the country and its tribes."

"The premier employed me when I was in Accra. I'm Ghanaian. He doesn't trust locals. I think that's why you're coming all the way from Britain."

Heidi hastened her pace a trifle to keep abreast. "Tell me about the premier. What kind of a man is Mr Moagi Makgunda?"

"You'll address him as *Honourable*."

"Tell me anything."

They emerged from the terminal building and walked towards a guarded, restricted car park with a signboard that read: VVIP.

"He's a gentleman richer than you can ever imagine. He's sincere in his ways, compassionate and merciful. Many South Africans find him a role model. He has the charisma of a demigod." They reached a double-exhaust metallic-blue Mercedes Benz 320 CDI jeep. He opened the door for her, bowing slightly. "If the Devil asked for my soul in exchange for a hundredth of Hon. Makgunda's money and a tenth of his character, I'd happily give him."

"How does the man make his money?" She asked climbing into the backseat.

"He's a gifted business mogul. Hon. Makgunda exploits opportunities." He closed the door and went round the vehicle to put her bag in the hood. The chauffeur took his seat, locked the doors and eased the car out of the airport. "Hon. Makgunda has no eccentricities," the man continued offhandedly. "He loves his three daughters and their mother. He has the heart of a saint. If all goes well he's considering purchasing castles in Britain and France and converting them to international hospices and orphanages. In my view, he's the most considerate person ever to grace this world in this day of selfishness and strife."

"How long have you worked for him?"

"This is my tenth year of a happy and uninterrupted employment."

“Tell me about his negative side? No person is entirely good or bad.”

“I’ll have to crack my head to come up with something. But, of course, his relations try to shun him.”

“Why would relations shun a good-hearted person of enormous means?”

The chauffeur smiled. “This is Africa, Heidi. On this continent people are suspicious of prosperous individuals. The failures of this continent believe that many people who become successful in business are into voodoo or some other dangerous juju and are responsible for their poverty. It’s silly.”

“Where I come from people have the utmost respect for successful people and look for ways to become as rich.”

The sun, a fiery mesmerising ball in Heidi’s unaccustomed eyes, broke above the eastern horizon, illuminating the skyscrapers of central Johannesburg jutting to their west. Driving on the Eastern By-Pass to the Ben Schoeman Highway, Seidu saw how the city had displaced the breath in her. He talked with a sense of belonging about Johannesburg, describing it as a city that gold built. The chauffeur’s eloquence and the modernity of the city impressed Heidi. With the sun rising and its rays unveiling towering office blocks, she experienced a feeling of a rejuvenating allegory.

Strangely and remotely, for variety in her new life, she hoped there were places for illicit adventure among the buildings. Despite the new setting, her tastes remained ragamuffin and unbridled. The longing surprised her, given the torment and torture she endured at the hands of men. But, introspectively, she realised she was raised on neglect and sexual abuse and now tended to miss them.

When a regrettable mosaic of her early life in the Docklands of London and lately in the Château Richelieu flicked in her mind, she found it difficult to believe the journey she was undertaking was an embarkation on a new life, a godsend opportunity for her to fit in the acceptable world. But a nuance of her yearned for that shrewd life of overindulgence when she made men old enough to be her fathers and grandfathers grimace in erotic pleasure.

During the pervasive escapades, she had held the reins over men; otherwise she had lived as an underdog and garbage, often contemplating suicide. Now suddenly something that had sounded far-fetched when Mr Scott Randall introduced it and smacked of impossibility, was materialising. If this wasn't a case of the Heavens considering her favourably for the first time, then it was an elaborate dream beginning in Nancy and meant to frustrate her to death when she woke up.

The drive to Pretoria took shorter than she had expected. Perhaps it was on account of the chauffeur babbling about Johannesburg and her fascination with the beauty of Gauteng Province. Again, unlike what she had imagined while still in Nancy, Pretoria was a garden metropolis by any standard. The car stopped at an imposing gate. An armed policeman walked to the car, peered inside and nodded at the chauffeur.

"Where're we, Seidu?"

"This is the premier's residence, Heidi," Seidu said as the gate slid open revealing a tree-, amphora- and flowerpot-flanked meandering driveway. "We've arrived."

"This looks like the entrance to a five-star hotel."

The Ghanaian smiled. "Without exaggerating, this is a slice of Hawaiian splendour. The environment will pamper you. It took me many years to get used to waking up in Paradise." He drove steadily on the driveway, his speed deliberately that of a funeral hearse, for Heidi to take a good introductory look at her new aristocratic surroundings.

"What's that behind the trees?"

"That's a hangar. The premier owns a private jet. He also owns some horses."

"This place must crawl with labourers and maids."

"But it's difficult to notice. This estate is vast."

"Is the gentleman home?"

Seidu nodded. "He leaves at eight-thirty for the Provincial Offices in Joburg. You'll meet him before he leaves, he insisted on that."

The mansion loomed when the car passed the final curve. Yellow and spectral from its exotic architectural details, it awed her. In front of the house stood a fountain complete with gargoyles and parading peacocks. The sheer size of the mansion pleasantly astounded her.

The curtains in a window on the first floor were open. Squinting against the sun rising behind the house, Heidi was taken aback when she saw nude figures in the window. Two naked ebony bodies were in a compromising position by the window. It appeared an adult with his back to the window was molesting a minor, or was it a diminutive female?

Agape, she raised a hand to tap Seidu Amissah's shoulder and bring his attention to the window, but hesitated on a second thought. The possibilities of the image being either realistic or phantasmagorical were myriad. Perhaps it was a male staff member frolicking with a pygmy chambermaid. The chauffeur had told her the premier trusted foreigners. Or it was the honourable himself having fun with his wife. Or she was hallucinating from the fatigue of flying for several hours.

Unsure if her untamed mind with its acquired indulgent tendencies wasn't conjuring the image, she blinked several times, but the curtains closed that instant. Or had they been open in the first instance?

Chapter 22

Like a blacksmith lost in his trade by a blazing furnace, Moagi Makgunda exerted himself, sweat pouring from his body, his back muscles knotting and unknotting rhythmically. But unlike a smith, he was prostrate and naked. Beneath him a youthful body, also unclothed, wriggled. Girlish hands clung to his shoulder blades.

Despite the mounting zeal in him, he was tiring. Minor cramps in his thighs were proving a constant interference. Years ago, when he began seducing his elder and eldest daughters, Eunice, now thirteen, and Eurydice, eighteen, he had done it intoxicated to quash feelings of guilt and shame that rose in him. Back then, by every intent and purpose, he wished he forswore the act, which he plainly saw as incriminating, dehumanising and the worst affront by a father to his biological daughters. Now the romps were a norm he and his two daughters couldn't do without. Their affection was flagrant.

Eunice's gasps urged him on. Their breathing became laboured as they breathed into each other's nostrils. Soon they would climax and he would harvest their mingled secretions on a white handkerchief in his right hand. Stains of blood or her secretions were the gist of the debauchery.

He grunted, growled and tensed, but a deep instinct made him look over his shoulder. Someone had intruded. He squinted and blinked numerous times in disbelief. Eula, his youngest daughter of eleven, stood near the foot of the bed. She was watching and sobbing. Moagi froze, so did Eunice when she raised her head prompted by her father's astonishment.

Eula was barefoot in a white fancy morning gown, a small violin in her right hand, its bow in her left. The little girl was transfixed. Behind her, the door stood ajar. When he recovered from the shock of the discovery, he knew he had to act swiftly to forestall acrimonious consequences. His wife, Katherine, was asleep in their

bedroom. Eula, lastborn and spoiled, was closer to her mother than to him.

He dropped the handkerchief and grabbed his gown heaped beside Eunice's head on a pillow. Throwing it over his back tactfully like a shawl and at the same time dismounting from Eunice and the bed, his back to his youngest daughter, he covered Eunice's torso with a quilt they were lying on. Shamefaced, Eunice rested her head on the pillow, turned away and stared at a wall as her father wore his gown over bare skin.

Eula dropped the violin and the bow. A rustle of her gown and a tapping of her heels, and she was out of the bedroom. Aware that if the indulgence reached his wife the consequences would be uncontainable, he ran after Eula. But the girl being young and agile, and he, an emergent sexually wearied forty-one-year-old man afflicted with cramps and still catching his breath from an abortive climax, couldn't measure up.

On emerging from the bedroom, he hoped he would see her running in a passage. But she was nowhere in sight. Her bedroom was three doors from Eunice's. After standing on a landing and looking down a staircase, he ran to her bedroom nearly bumping into an elderly chambermaid emerging with folded linen in her arms.

"Sorry, sir," the maid said cordially, standing aside, taken aback by the haste. "Good morning."

"Did you see Eula just now?"

"No, sir." She looked at her wristwatch. "She must be in her room. Is—"

Her saw that she was about to ask if everything was alright, but he rushed away down the passage. A moment later he threw open Eula's bedroom door and stood framed in the doorway. The room was spacious and neatly furnished. Her bed was dishevelled. The girl was nowhere.

The premier clenched his fists and swore under his breath he would kill the little girl. If she had rushed to the master bedroom to report them to his wife, he would eliminate her as a witness. And he wouldn't spare his wife's life either if the incest was brought to her attention; his reputation and career came first.

He understood Katherine as a sentimental person who acted on the spur of her impulses. She would report him to the police without weighing any costs or consequences. She was far from the type that would commit perjury for his sake. Not only would he be charged with incest, but statutory rape and abuse of fatherly trust. South African newspapers and TV news channels would depict him with contempt as a front-page criminal. Child-focused Aid Agencies would march on thoroughfares in Pretoria and Johannesburg denouncing like-minded politicians and horde ridicule against him. As an honourable provincial leader, the courts wouldn't treat him with leniency either.

On his way to the master bedroom, he stopped at a digitally-locked gun cabinet concealed in a corridor closet and retrieved a pistol, a loaded Jericho 941F. Folding his arms, he hid it under his left armpit and stepped back from the closet in time to see the elderly chambermaid looking at him from the end of the corridor. Because the linen was still in her arms and she wasn't doing any particular work in that part of the corridor, he knew she had taken it upon herself to spy on him out of curiosity.

Moagi smiled at her and waved a hand, a calculated pretence at normalcy, but inside he knew the maid was jeopardising her own life. The woman waved at him timidly and disappeared into a door nearby. She might've seen him concealing the weapon. If he killed Eula, Katherine or both that day, he would deal with the maid later.

Moagi walked as casually as possible to the parental bedroom, his mind spinning. How much of what had Eula seen? At her age and a pupil at a Dominican school of strict Catholic tenets and morals, what did she know about sexual intimacy? The last time, about three years ago, when she had strayed close to talking about intimacy, she had sought to know if indeed parents bought babies from maternity homes and hospitals. Katherine and he had nodded their heads. "Why do you ask?" Her mother had asked her. "We need a little brother to play with," she had answered. "If your father and I find time and the right brother, someone who looks like you and us, we'll buy him." Katherine's statement pacified Eula.

If he was going to pull the trigger, he would need all his brains to fabricate a story that would exonerate him in the eyes of the police. Though none came, he reckoned one would after the double or triple murders, considering the chambermaid's inquisitive disposition. His mind would've to work overtime to save him from the gallows. If it failed, his money wouldn't. In the meantime, whatever had to be done to protect his reputation and political career had to be done.

Assuming every casual step he took towards the master bedroom added ample time to Eula to furnish Katherine with details and destroy him, the distance lengthened to a hundred kilometres. Then the door appeared before him.

In his imagination he saw Eula and Katherine sitting facing each other in bedside chairs, the girl talking, both sobbing. He heard the Jericho going off twice. Then he saw them motionless on the floor in growing pools of their blood.

Barefoot, he was stealth. No voices emanated from the bedroom. If Eula was in the room she couldn't have heard his advent. Pausing slightly by the door to listen, he turned the knob and stepped in, his armed hand now behind his back. Eula wasn't in the room either. Katherine lay in the bed, her mouth open.

The Jericho poised, he crossed to her to verify her sleep wasn't a stage act. Indeed she was fast asleep; light snoring characterising her breathing. The serenity on her face didn't speak otherwise. Where was Eula? She had to be somewhere in the mansion. It wasn't possible for her to have run down a staircase and out of the house in the little time he had demurred before following her. Had she taken the stairs, he ought to have seen her descending when he stood on the upper landing. It didn't mean that if the girl wasn't in her bed then she wasn't in her room, he reasoned.

Again, the pistol hidden under his armpit, he exited the bedroom, closed the door and retraced his footsteps. On stealing a backward glance, he caught a glimpse of the chambermaid peering at him through a door. Her head retreated instantly and the door slid shut. He sneered, continued to Eula's room and walked in. The woman was the least of his worries at the moment. Eula and what she had witnessed were his occupation.

It appeared Katherine hadn't been roused. He would use the pistol only to scare the girl from running away from him. There won't be any gunshots. If Eula proved incriminating, he would strangle her, decapitate her body and bury her remains in different forests. Or he could throw them in an acid bath.

Framed family photographs and Eula's portraits stared down at him from walls. More stood on a mahogany *escritoire* and a chest of drawers. He went round the bed. No Eula. He stood on the side of the bed, thinking, his eyes roving between the bedroom's two closets built adjacent to the other. If she were in any one of them, then perhaps she was looking at him through one of the ventilation louvers in the doors.

He steadily approached the closet nearer to him; haste and a display of anger could see the girl panicking. Smiling benevolently, he opened the doors and moved some clothes hung in the unit. No sign of the girl. He closed the doors and stepped to the second, his movements still unhurried. On opening the closet's door, he found Eula sitting on the floor amid suspended clothes. She was dejected and still sobbing.

Moagi slid the pistol into a pocket in the gown. "Oh! Eula, Jesus!" His voice was solicitous and sympathetic. He knelt and gently lifted her chin. She shut her eyes and brought up her forearms to cover them. "How long did you stand in your sister's bedroom?"

"I saw everything, Daddy." Her voice was infirm and mournful.

"You lie. What did you see?" A forced smile played on his lips.

"You touched her breasts and kissed her."

"What else did you see, Eula?"

"You removed all her clothes and pressed her against the window. Then you placed her on the bed and lay on top of her."

She shrugged her shoulders and opened her eyes. Tender still, he took her hand in his, drew her out of the closet and led her to an armchair.

"Why, Daddy?" She asked settling in the chair.

"Why *what*, Eula?" He was at a loss; this was unprecedented. Two questions weighed on his mind: should he strangle her now or later? If he let her live until he returned from his office, wouldn't she

disclose what she saw to Katherine and her classmates? Squatting on his hunches in front of her, his hands in her lap, he looked her in the eyes and put on a bold face. "You surprise me, Eula. Didn't your teacher tell you about the Fruit of Knowledge?" With his hands, he wiped her tears and cajoled her by rubbing her shoulders. "Smile, little angel, Daddy loves you."

She smiled mildly. "Mrs Viljoen taught us about Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden."

"What did she say about the fruit?"

"She said it was forbidden." She scowled, trying to remember. "Adam and Eve ate it and became God's enemies."

"Your teacher was partially right. The fruit is forbidden to some, but not to everybody. Some people are meant to grope in darkness and achieve nothing throughout their lives. Some people are meant to partake of the fruit and prosper. It's like Christ's parables. Some people we meant to understand them, some weren't."

"Where's the fruit, Daddy?"

"It's in halves. I've half of it and you've the other one, just like Eunice. When we put the halves together we recreate the Fruit of Knowledge. It's partaken lying down."

"Mrs Viljoen said it was a real fruit no longer found these days."

"Your teacher is cunning. She stopped you from experimenting."

"I want to taste the fruit, Daddy. Why do you favour Eunice so much?"

"I love my daughters equally. I'm a good father."

"Why don't you do it with me?"

He signed loudly. "You're too young to keep secrets. The fruit is only shared by secretive people."

She frowned. "Eunice is only two years older. Is she secretive?"

"Yes, that's why she didn't tell you."

"But I can keep a secret."

"Won't you tell, Mummy, Mrs Viljoen or friends?"

"Swear with your life."

"I swear, Daddy."

"Say: 'I swear with my life that upon revealing the secret to anyone I must die miserably and go to Hell'. Say it, Eula."

“I swear with my life that upon revealing the secret to anyone I must die miserably and go to Hell.”

He made a Sign of the Cross in front of her. “Your oath is registered in the book of oaths in Heaven. Angels have sent a copy to Hell.”

“When do we do it, Daddy? What does the fruit taste like?”

“The first time it is bitter. But it becomes as sweet as pineapples the second time.”

“So it tastes like pineapples?”

“It tastes like the fruit salad of pineapples and the passion fruit of Australia. It tastes like iced *mojitos* from Mauritius. Other times it tastes like strawberry sorbet and vanilla ice-cream. The taste is beyond description.”

“I can’t wait, Daddy.”

“We must wait, Eula.”

“Wait for what?” Impatience glowed on her face.

“We wait for the ink on the page where your oath was written to dry up. And there’s something the two of us must do first. God did it with Abraham and Moses. It’s called a covenant.”

The French poodle, Hicks, entered and trotted to them. The dog brushed against him and Eula’s legs and wagged its tail.

Chapter 23

Alone on a shiny ball-and-claw dining table in her allocated quarters, Heidi Gaynor breakfasted on oats, omelette, baked beans, smoked sausages, ham and bacon a resident chef brought her. She was in a reserved two-piece suit for good impression. Refreshed and having rested a little, she appeared ready to be interviewed for a formal position.

At five minutes to ten o'clock, about two hours after her arrival at Randlord Mansion, a light tap came on the door and the butler, Divine Kakudji, walked in as she was washing her hands. He was in a black tuxedo complimented with a white shirt and trousers and black shoes. The chef, who brought her the breakfast, carried an empty tray. He walked behind the dwarf and made for the table to clear it.

"The lord of the house will meet you now," the dwarf said, standing stiffly at a distance and nodding his head cordially. "You can follow me. No one wants to keep Hon. Makgunda waiting."

If the butler hadn't smiled good-humouredly when he made the final statement, she might've taken it as a stern warning. The man led her out of the room. She followed him through passages but kept a safe distance from him, a prejudicial precaution. After growing up sceptical and fearful of dwarfs and having watched them swallowing flames of fire and swords in Russian and gypsy circuses on television, she thought them wicked.

Medieval gilded artworks, some French and familiar and some unknown to her, decorated the passages. Divine Kakudji, for that was what the Ghanaian had said was the butler's name, led her into a rear sunbathed drawing room where the premier was sitting in a chair. In dark sunglasses, a funereal Italian suit, shirt and necktie, the man was deathly. Heidi was pleasantly surprised when the man rose to shake her hand.

“Miss Heidi Gaynor, I presume. My name is Moagi—Moagi Makgunda, the lord of the house and the premier of Gauteng Province.”

“Heidi Gaynor, sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She found his hand warm and feminine-soft.

“The pleasure is thoroughly mine, Heidi. You’re in good hands. How was your flight?” He gestured to a chair adjacent to his.

Both sat.

“It challenged me to some extent, but I coped, sir.”

“How was your breakfast?”

“English and scrumptious, I must say. Thank you.” She glanced warily at Divine Kakudji standing two paces from her.

“The butler appears to frighten you, Miss Heidi. It might sound odd because already the man served you from the time you arrived at the threshold, but formalities are proper.” He turned to the dwarf. “Divine Kakudji, meet Miss Heidi Gaynor, a new staff member from London. Miss Heidi... Divine Kakudji.”

The dwarf crossed to her and shook her hand. Even though she was seated, she remained taller than the man. His grip was firm, vice-like.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr Divine Kakudji.”

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Miss Heidi. I wish you a long stay.”

“He’s a goodhearted man. He comes from a family of dwarfs in the Congo,” the premier added. “I assure you he’s harmless. Once you make yourself see him with the eyes of a tourist he’ll fascinate you. I find him very fascinating myself, one of Randlord’s riveting attractions.”

“It’s a matter of time, sir, I’ll get used to him.”

“There’s always a false air of savage raillery about dwarfs. Divine Kakudji bears everything with good humour.” He cleared his throat pleasantly. “You’ll serve as one of my PAs and also as governess over my three children. Of course, someone is employed as their governess and they’re well-behaved children. Nothing is delinquent about them. But their mother travels a lot to Dubai and other places.”

"I haven't got governess experience. I don't have the required skills to—"

He laughed. "This is Africa, Miss Heidi. You'll learn on the job. You'll insinuate English manners and etiquettes in the children and teach them proper pronunciation. I don't want them to grow into educated barbarians or xenophobic thugs. You know what I mean."

"Yes sir, but I want you to know from the outset that I'm seventeen."

Moagi showed sharp resentment of the disclosure. "How much were you looking at per month, Heidi? Your salary can come in rand, US dollars, euro or British pounds."

The question took her by surprise. "That's a pretty tough question, my good sir. What were you proposing?"

"You can't work for me and remain poor. Only fools are poor. If you aren't what Scandinavians call a *gowke* you've no reason to be poor."

She stared at him, thinking and pleurably astounded.

"Take your time to decide. In the meantime Divine'll give you fifty thousand rand for your convenience and perhaps a new wardrobe that suits our African weather."

Her eyes flashed.

"It's the custom here that many of my employees are taught target shooting and basic bodyguard manoeuvres. You'll appreciate that a medical doctor in the army is basically a soldier. Prince Harry is a combat helicopter pilot, but he's basically an infantry soldier."

"I understand, sir," she said. "The estate must be a high-risk area."

"The rifle range is behind the hangar. Under the hangar is our facility for Metallic Silhouettes. The assistant head of security will take you through the paces." He glanced at his wristwatch. "I've a funeral to attend. My sister-in-law passed away in a hit-and-run. Burial is in one hour."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"She was a very pleasant woman. She leaves behind a bedridden husband."

"You've my condolence."

“Don’t let this tarnish your impression of South Africa or Randlord. It’s not an evil omen, but an unfortunate coincidence that you arrived when the Makgunda family is mourning. I remain thankful you cut short your secretarial studies in London and came at short notice.”

“It was nothing, sir. I didn’t have much in terms of personal belongings. I live frugally, like a student. And Mr Randall assisted me at every stage. He’s many well-placed connections and he’s very generous.”

“Mr Randall is a good man—one of the few last good men on the planet.” He stood up. “At some point I’ll need to introduce you to my relatives, friends and associates—my world per se. The graveyard wouldn’t be conducive to that.”

“No, sir.”

“You can spend the afternoon sight-seeing. Pretoria has many tourist resorts. Make sure you exploit this gap or you may not find time in the future. One of my chauffeurs will drive you around. Welcome to Randlord Mansion, Miss Heidi.”

She beamed a smile. “Are there other candidates for this job? Will there be an interview?”

“That would be a waste of time and resources. I trust Mr Scott Randall. If you can take shorthand notes, file and retrieve documents, then you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you, sir. I hope I’ll measure up to the requirements of the job.”

“You measured up while you were in Nancy. Mr Randall, my friend and international agent, has an aptitude for finding me the best whenever I give him a task. The butler will take you to your quarters.” He rose and walked out of the drawing room.

Chapter 24

As the trapezoidal casket descended, Father Hendrik van Vuuren raised his voice in prayer: “Lord, remember Your Church throughout the world. Make us grow in love, together with our Pope, and Fredericks Marcus, our bishop, and all the clergy. Remember Sister Lerato Makgunda whom You’ve called from this life. Remember our brothers and sisters who’ve gone to their rest in the hope of rising again. Bring them and all the departed into the light of Your presence. Have mercy on us all....”

The hearse had retreated to the shade of a tree. Geraniums and chrysanthemums lay in gloomy readiness on the graveside mound.

But an ambulance parked near the mourners, which had brought Lebokang Makgunda from Steve Biko Academy Hospital, was an unnerving reminder that the deceased’s husband, though he was eager to bid farewell to his wife, battled for his life. He was in striped hospital garbs and sitting in a wheelchair with a holder suspending tubes, a sachet for his intravenous feeding and a colostomy bag. Lebokang Makgunda, slouched in the chair, frail and bony, his skin a lifeless hue, was a sorrowful sight.

In dark clothes and glasses, the graveside knot of people was tense, reticent, many snivelling and sobbing. Naturally, SABC reporters and their attendant photographers had been drawn to the funeral on account of Moagi Makgunda being a bereaved public figure. Uniformed police officers and plainclothes security personnel stood in strategic positions in the graveyard.

The premier stood in the midst of his political lieutenants and colleagues obliged to mourn with him. His face stony from assumed grief, he occasionally wiped his nose and reached beneath his glasses with a handkerchief as though he were crying. Pretence was his forte and he knew that even the priest, despite the lengths he went to appear mournful and in communion with God, wouldn’t beat him at it.

But at the premier's elbow and in stark mourning, from her bobbing shoulders and the tears streaming down her checks, Katherine grieved the death of her sister-in-law pitifully. Their daughters, Eurydice, Eunice and Eula, stood holding hands in front of their parents. Like their parents, their attire was dark.

In the eyes of the gathered relatives, Moagi had done his part by buying a casket at an extortionate price and funding every expense, and he had kept vigil with the mourners until the early hours of the morning. Then his wife and he had excused themselves for the sake of their daughters. On arriving home at about half-past four in the morning, he and Katherine had tea in their bedroom upon his insistence. When she slept, she slid into stertorous sleep for at least five hours. Then he had visited Eunice in her bedroom, and Eula had stumbled on them when she came to play the sordino for her sister.

After the prayer, the ritual of casting earth into the grave began. A female nurse wheeled Lebokang closer to the grave. Due to his frailty, the nurse assisted him all the way—holding his hand and placing the soil from a shovel onto his palm, drawing his hand over the grave and tipping it.

Photographers stepped forward. Cameras clicked and flashed; this was the most sombre moment of the burial. Lebokang shed tears, a sign that he was abreast of proceedings. Without further delay, the nurse wiped his hands and eyes with tissue paper and wheeled him to the ambulance, confirmation that the patient was in critical condition. The ambulance crew helped the nurse transfer him from the chair unto a stretcher bed. Their actions were hurried as though this was a scene of a terrible accident. The ambulance sped away, its lights flashing. Many eyes followed it until it was out of sight.

The earth-casting ritual continued.

Moagi eavesdropped on two female mourners conversing:

“Witnesses said the motorist was a woman in a burqa,” the first woman said. “The car was a Nissan Qashqai. It was found abandoned and fire-gutted.”

“What’s a burqa?”

“It’s a loose robe with a facial veil worn by Islamic women. It’s enforced in Afghanistan and some parts of Pakistan. The police suspect a man was in the burqa.”

“Couldn’t Vehicle Registry trace the car?”

“The car’s chassis and engine numbers were ground to nothing. Without the numbers, forensic investigations are voided.”

“Whoever wanted her dead is a meticulous planner.”

“We live among wolves.”

Moagi and Katherine stepped forward and joined the earth-casting queue.

Not long after, sextons began shovelling. Standing by the mound, relatives arranging the flowers on the grave, Father Van Vuuren concluded the burial rites, crossed himself and shook hands with some relatives. An aide relieved him of his smoking urn and escorted him to his car. The mourners started to disperse. Moagi followed the priest and caught up with him and his aide before they reached the car park. Bodyguards changed positions in relation to his movements, but kept their distance.

“Father, can I’ve a word with you in private, please?”

The premier and the priest stood on a paved path passing through an outlandish Jewish section of the graveyard.

“I’m at your service, son. Let not your heart be troubled.” The priest nodded at his aide, dismissing him. The aide walked towards the car park. The politician and the priest strolled into the Jewish section, away from the people. “You’ve my undivided attention, Hon. Makgunda.”

“She spoke with you shortly before her death,” Moagi began blatantly, his voice an accusing whisper. It wasn’t a question, but a statement he made with deliberate indifference.

“That’s true, my son. Sister Lerato came to the cathedral.”

“That I heard, Father. I reckon I’m privileged to know her last words. Would you be kind enough to tell me?”

“Sister Lerato came to demand her last sacraments.”

“That’s very strange. In others words *she* knew?”

He nodded mildly, studious. “She knew she’d die before sunrise.”

“Did she say who was after her?”

The priest considered for a while. “She didn’t say, my son, but she was sure she’d die. There’s a difference between knowing she’d die and knowing she’d be killed. I wish I’d given her the sacraments.”

“How could she have known? Did she mention her enemies?”

“The police asked me the same questions over and over.”

“I’m sorry; Father, but I represent the interests of the entire Makgunda family.”

“She wanted prayer from me, that’s all she wanted. Were you aware she wore beads around her waist?”

“I couldn’t have known. She wasn’t my wife.”

The priest nearly broke stride and gave him a cautionary glance.

“Forgive me if I sounded rude, Father.”

“People who saw the beads at the scene said she was a *sangoma*.” He looked briefly heavenwards as if searching for a divine clue or the face of God. “I performed her requiem with a heavy heart. God will forgive me.”

“God is merciful, Father.”

“That’s what sets Him apart as God. If you knew the one who did it, what would you do?”

Moagi mulled for some seconds. “What can a mortal do, Father? Vengeance is the Lord’s.”

“You make me proud as your priest. The sight of beads on Sister Lerato soiled my spirit. I saw myself as a failure—a priest without calling, a swineherd, literally.”

“Father Van Vuuren, I hope you won’t be insulted by what I’m about to say.”

The priest stopped; prompting the premier to stop too, and looked at him. “Nothing but sin and sinful thoughts offend God. It isn’t about Father Van Vuuren, but God. What do you want to tell me?”

“I’ve a high regard for your office and commitment to the parish. I relish your sermons and teachings.”

“Please stop showering me with praises, or I might slip into vanity.”

“I feel you aren’t telling me her last words. She must’ve disclosed her enemy to you. I don’t think you’re being honest when you say she came to receive sacraments.”

“I’m not a rogue priest. Are your hands clean, Hon. Makgunda?”

The politician showed him the palms of his hands. “My hands are clean.”

“The souls of the Jews buried here my witnesses; only God can declare your hands bloody or clean. Sister Lerato suspected you of evil, something that I brought to your attention. My intention was fatherly. I wanted you to mend a rift if at all one had developed between you people. I don’t want to think her death confirmed her fears.”

“What would it take for me to leave your church?”

It was a bombshell. The priest’s eyes widened. “I’m a tool in the hands of God. I’ve no church, Hon. Makgunda. I’m a custodian on behalf of the Pope.”

“Your discreet disposition tells me I’m in the wrong fold.”

“Haven’t I preached to you and served you Communion religiously? My disposition is personal and has nothing to do with the Eucharist.” He paused. “Beware of falling into error, my child. Become Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran or anything else at your own risk. The choice is yours.”

“Whenever I’m in the cathedral, I feel alienated. I can’t shake off the feeling that I’m in the wrong fold.”

“What do you consider the right fold?”

“The Russian Orthodox Church. I intend to make a pilgrimage to St Sergius in Zagorsk.”

“That’s an appalling thought. But it’s well within your rights to join any church of your choice.” Father Van Vuuren’s voice was malicious. “You can become Hindu or Shinto if you want.”

“To mark Lerato’s passing away, I shall make a substantive money transfer to the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Russia.”

“Am I supposed to know?”

“When it makes the news it shouldn’t surprise you. I’m saying farewell.”

The priest laughed. “Beware Sheol beckons.” He composed himself immediately. “You’re deeply aggrieved and not thinking logically. Give yourself time to sail through this phase. The Lord be with you, Hon. Makgunda.” The priest turned and retraced his steps, leaving the premier standing idly among Jewish graves.

Chapter 25

Compared to Britain and France, South Africa was a furnace, a constant reminder to foreigners that they were in Africa. Comfort-pampered in the backseat of a Toyota Land cruiser VX 200, Heidi Gaynor was in a miniskirt, a T-shirt and a pair of sandals as a counter-measure against the scorching heat.

The interior of the vehicle was air-conditioned and homely. She thanked her stars for catapulting her to a decent and opulent world very much unlike the undomesticated realm of her upbringing.

The touring options had been numerous. Divine Kakudji and Seidu told her the Magaliesberg, that range of dark mountains to the north of the city, were delightful to explore, and mentioned many kinds of fruit sold at wayside kiosks along the range. They also tried to lure her to a sanctuary called Parrots' Paradise to view thousands of exotic birds. Then nearly warring, Divine Kakudji sought to entice her to visit the Potchefstroom Museum and see a great assortment of historical surprises that ranged from a Voortrekker wagon to an ancient tooth extractor. Seidu Amissah argued that she might find the Lichtenburg Diamond Fields fascinating.

For someone her age and calibre, someone bereft of professional qualifications, the world hadn't promised her success besides a penny-wise existence alongside rich, exploitative men. Excited with her royal treatment and reception so far, she looked forward to a great day of sight-seeing and learning as a tourist.

The chauffeur assigned to her, Seidu Amissah, had finally suggested she visited the Voortrekker Monument in the southern outskirts of Pretoria. At the Château Richelieu she had led the life of a prisoner. Now she was suddenly free and coddled and in a position of authority as a billionaire's personal assistant-cum-governess over his children.

But in the back of her mind she wondered if fate had looked at her favourably, or her employer had something sinister up his cuff.

The latter she dismissed, aware Seidu, whom she saw as a friend now and an amicable character, would've warned her if anything was amiss. Apart from encouraging epithets, the chauffeur hadn't described the premier otherwise. Mr Randall had indicated that indeed Moagi Makgunda was an African who took pride in employing a white person for political reasons. Perhaps in his eyes she was a representative of South Africa's former colonisers and it somewhat assuaged him to place her in his employ.

"Who were the Voortrekkers, Seidu?"

"There's a saying in this country: if everybody in South Africa returned to the land of their ancestors, nobody would be left behind."

She laughed.

"The Voortrekkers were pioneers led by one Louis Trichardt and Johannes van Rensburg. In 1835 they made their way into the hinterland and reached the far north of the Transvaal—now Gauteng. Shangani warriors on the border with Mozambique wiped out Van Rensburg's group. Trichardt's group mostly succumbed to malaria at a place called Lourenco Marques. However, behind these advance parties other groups followed in the same spirit."

As Seidu drove past a large signboard written 'Voortrekker Monument' and followed signs pointing to the reception, she kept her eyes on a brickwork superstructure jutting from the ground and dominating the peripheral skyline of Pretoria. He parked the car. After reception formalities and a tour guide in khakis and military boots was assigned to them, they exited the park's administrative building and headed to the gates of the monument surrounded by a symbolic laager of wagons. The guide was white, academic and about thirty years old.

"The Voortrekker Monument is forty metres high and built on a base forty by forty metres," the guide said.

"When was it built?" Heidi asked.

"In 1936 a committee known as the Sentrale Volks Monumente Komitee solicited architects throughout the globe to submit proposals for the monument. The committee was interested in designs that captured the fortitude, courage and indomitable spirit of

the Voortrekkers, and they wanted the design to harmonise with the vastness, solitude and mystery of the African landscape.”

They ascended the steps in the break in the laager. Heidi never stopped asking questions.

The guide took them round the monument, talking and pointing at busts in the altar’s walls. At the entrance to the superstructure was a bronze carving of a Voortrekker woman with two children clutching her skirt. “These are busts of Great Trek leaders. This one is Piet Retief. Round the corner is Andries Pretorius. That one there is Hendrik Potgieter. A nameless, symbolic leader guards the forth corner.”

They entered the monument into a lower chamber. A flame burned on a pedestal. “That’s an eternal flame lit in 1938 from a torch carried in relays by members of the Voortrekker Youth Movement. They ran with it flaming from the Van Riebeeck Statue in Cape Town on the occasion of the centenary of the Great Trek.”

“It has been kept burning since?” Heidi asked, marvelling.

“It was kept burning in Pretoria until it was placed in its present position in 1949 after the monument was opened.” The guide gestured at a cenotaph of polished granite in the hall. The words ‘*Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika*’ were inscribed in the structure. “This cenotaph is positioned in such a way that at noon on 16 December, the anniversary of the 1838 Battle of the Blood River, in which a force of four hundred and seventy Boers routed twelve thousand five hundred Zulus, a shaft of light lances through an aperture in the doomed roof and sweeps across the inscription.”

“What do the words mean?” Heidi asked.

“Oh, my omission,” the guide said apologetically. “*Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika* is Afrikaans for ‘We for thee, South Africa’.”

A staircase took them to the Hall of Heroes. The guide brought their attention to a frieze. “This is a depiction of the major events of the Great Trek,” he said. “This frieze is ninety-two metres by two metres high. It’s made up of twenty-seven marble panels. On 16 December at precisely 11 am, the time of the beginning of the Battle of Blood River, the lance of light through the roof illuminates the tableau showing the Voortrekkers making their acclaimed vow to

God that they would build a church if He'd grant them victory over the Zulus. The frieze was modelled in clay here in South Africa, couriered to Italy and then sculpted in marble from the Apennines. Michelangelo used marble from the same source."

"How does the light reach the cenotaph below?" Heidi enquired, puzzled.

"When you look down you'll see a circular opening in the floor of this hall. Through this aperture the cenotaph below can be viewed. The shaft of light passes through this opening to reach that inscription." He pointed at the doomed ceiling.

Heidi saw a bas-relief of a segment of the southern hemisphere of the globe.

"The aperture in the ceiling allows a shaft of light to illuminate the site of the battlefield on the segment." The guide prattled excitedly. Soon he took them to the roof where an observation terrace revealed a cosmic panorama of Pretoria and its surroundings.

"Would I be off the mark if I said this monument was founded on superstition?" Heidi asked the guide.

"You give me the impression you're new to South Africa."

"I arrived this morning from Europe."

"This is a land of superstitious races. Both the natives and the whites are gullible. In this country many things aren't what they seem to the eye."

Chapter 26

Hicks, the snow-white French poodle trailing behind them, at times overtaking and cavorting elatedly ahead of them, Moagi and Eula rode steadily on separate horses towards the western end of the estate. At most the horses cantered.

It was noon when the two set out into the vast, intriguing yet soothing expanse of the estate. Cloud smudges drifted in a placid sky, and it was hot. The mansion, the hangar, the stables and all the supporting structures of the property vanished behind them.

He saw that his company excited her, and since the day before when he brought her to his bosom by teaching her about secrets, she had become close to him. Father and daughter rode in matching cowboy hats and faded jeans, his attempt at solidarity.

Their mood gay, they rode on a dirt road snaking through tall eucalyptus trees. Moagi often rode ahead and urged Eula with praises and his open admiration of her riding an adult thoroughbred chestnut. Startled hares and squirrels scuttled in different directions at their advent. The horses marched majestically, the clatter of their hooves against gravel absorbing.

He told her they were a blessed family. She nodded. He expanded that about eighteen years ago, when he was wallowing in poverty, God opened his mind to the realisation that life was spiritual through and through.

She looked at him, incomprehension apparent in her eyes. "I don't understand, Daddy. Isn't it that there's Heaven and then this world?"

"Everything is spirit. Solomon's wealth was spiritual, so was the leprosy and poverty of the poor of Galilee." Using children's nomenclature, he told her that there was nothing infinite apart from finite things, and that whatever a person desired in life was already deposited in them.

He told her the story of creation; of God drawing Eve from Adam as a rib. Purposely circumventing, he informed her that everything of value was given that value by man. Like a priest, he talked about Lot's two daughters, their incestuous indulgence with their father and the birth of Moabites and the Ammonites—that the lineages born thereof weren't illegitimate per se, but something deposited in Noah at his creation as Eve was already in Adam from the beginning.

Eula was confounded. He assured her she would understand when she came of age, or shortly, when she partook of the Fruit of Knowledge. She needed not to despair; knowledge was in the offing.

Then he spoke of Christ and love. That God so loved the world that He sacrificed His only begotten Son. She added that whoever would believe in the Son would've everlasting life. He concurred, but talked about sacrifice. That it was the hallmark of all things spiritual. That gold passed through fire for it to shine.

“Does Eunice know about these things?”

“I taught her. She is enlightened and proud of her knowledge. Above all, she keeps her mouth shut. When God sent a message to Zachariah before John the Baptist was born, He clipped Zachariah's tongue until the time for him to speak was relevant. It goes to show how important it is to keep secrets.”

The vegetation changed to bush. They turned onto a footpath and continued on the same pace.

“Where're we going, Daddy?” she suddenly asked him.

“Have you forgotten about our agreement? We're almost there now. We're going to a certain spot for the covenant.”

They rode into a small veldt dotted with waist-high immaculate conical anthills. Moagi eased his horse towards one of the anthills and dismounted. She followed him to the spot and waited for him to leash his horse to a tree before he helped her down. He joyously lifted her in the air, almost flinging her, and placed her on the mound.

“I'm afraid of falling, Daddy.”

He smiled. "I won't walk away and leave you up there." But he turned his back to her, trudged in the grass and leashed her horse on the same tree as his.

Eula stood still, afraid of slipping from the anthill. Moagi returned, drew an afghan from the back of his shirt, and unsheathed it. Hicks looked at them curiously from a distance before its interest in them floundered. The dog dashed after insects and the scent of rodents.

"You scare me, Daddy. What's the dagger for?"

"Don't worry about the dagger, Eula. I want to tell you a familiar story."

"You want to tell me a story while I'm up here?"

"I've placed you there for a reason. I'm going to tell you the story of the Passover."

"That's boring, Daddy. Mrs Viljoen is ever repeating the story about the dark angel and stuff. Please tell me about Beauty and the Beast or Cinderella."

"Those are bedtime stories. I'm happy you're familiar with the Passover story, which makes my life easier. Before the event, God made a pact with Moses. The Israelites scouted for a ram without blemish. They smeared its blood on their doorposts. The good Lord summoned an angel of death to kill the firstborns of the Egyptians and their livestock."

"I know the story, Daddy. Get me down."

"What do you think is the teaching in the story?"

"It means God hated the Egyptians," she hazarded, rolling her eyes and laughing. "I don't know. Tell me, Daddy."

"There're two things. First, God wants perfect sacrifices. Secondly, everything, good or bad, is at God's disposal."

She sat on the peak and tried in vain to climb down; the sides were too steep for her. "Are you going to kill me?"

He laughed. "I'm trying to teach you something to prepare you for the partaking. As you stand on the threshold of wisdom, you'll make an oath in the hearing of the Passover angel."

"What do you want me to say?"

By tapping his thigh, he summoned the dog and carried him in the crook of his left arm. Suddenly his face went wooden. “Should you disclose our secrets to anyone—anyone being Mamma, your schoolmates, friends, your teachers, Eurydice and Eunice—the Angel of Death will—” He sank the afghan into the neck of the dog and threw it down, killing it instantly.

Eula screamed and covered her face with her hands.

Chapter 27

At five o'clock in the afternoon of January the twentieth, a day after Lerato's burial, Moagi and Katherine arrived at Lebokang Makgunda room in Steve Biko Academy Hospital, the latter holding a fruit hamper, flowers and a large birthday card.

The day before, when they visited him after his wife's burial, Lebokang turned and faced the wall when they walked in. He refused to answer in words or in signs when his brother asked him how he was feeling. While Moagi stood at his elder brother's bedside, trying to coerce him to talk, Katherine had replaced the flowers in the room with fresh ones. A nurse walked in and, on seeing that their presence stressed the patient, asked the couple to leave immediately.

Presently, at the door marked 'Unit 912', the couple hesitated, both sighing. Moagi opened the door and marched in. Katherine followed him with the hamper, the flowers and the card. But her husband stopped in mid-stride and she bumped into his back. He stood still, his eyes on the skeletal form on the bed.

Lebokang, in hospital garbs, was on the bed. Flies flew willy-nilly in and out of his open. Intravenous tubes and the colostomy bag were still attached to him. Lebokang was dead.

When Katherine looked past her husband, she held her bosom and clutched Moagi's jacket with her free hand, an instinctive reaction. Moagi glanced at her and saw that she was dazed, perhaps having hoped that he would live. He put an arm around her shoulders as a prelude to consoling her, to telling her that death eventually came to everyone, but Katherine dropped the items she was carrying and retreated backwards, exiting and closing the door.

Clearly the nurses and doctors hadn't realised as yet that Lebokang had died.

Moagi crossed to a telephone handset on a cabinet. A laminated sheet with a list of the hospital's extensions hung on the wall above the handset. A quick perusal showed him a number to dial. But when

he lifted the receiver and was about to dial the station desk on the same floor, his eyes on Lebokang's body, he noticed that the corpse was clutching a folded, handwritten sheet of paper.

He cradled the receiver and crossed to the deathbed. Gently, as if abrupt action would wake or harm the body, he extracted the piece of paper from Lebokang's right hand and unfolded it. It was a letter in his brother's unmistakable hand.

Chapter 28

The sky was overcast, severely compromising visibility in the unkempt area around Mamelodi Township's graveyard. Nocturnal birds cried disquietingly. But Regis and Aluwani, carrying a second-hand digging pick on his shoulder and a shovel respectively, threw the tools over a precast wall and scaled it, landing into a section with wilting wreaths indicative of recent burials.

One with darkness, they picked their tools and walked stealthily among the graves, picking their way slowly and deliberately, the dirt on them remarkable camouflage. Occasional streaks of distant flashes of lightening rendered them silhouettes. A battery torch Regis held illuminated their path as they made their way to the old section of the graveyard.

In silent formation and not more than half a pace from each other, graves solemnly filled the several hectares like small rock outcrops in one sod. Some were tall and intricate, like miniature cathedrals raising spectres and pinnacles; others were as flat as pavement cobblestones. Yet others were unsightly mounds of earth, tufts of grass with broken pottery and enamelware in their midst, or a collection of unmarked rocks.

Both knew that despite not a soul being in sight or stirring in the shadowy darkness, they had to take precaution against waking the cemetery caretaker who also doubled as a security guard. Earlier reconnaissance showed them that the man, a bachelor of eccentric habits who drank heavily and talked to the graves, led a solitary life in a doom-shaped old cottage tucked in a hedged corner of the graveyard.

They had learnt from vagrants and wreath vendors at the entrance of the cemetery that the caretaker was either possessed by the irate souls in his workplace, was mentally deranged or he had a special ability to converse with the dead. But one thing was certain, whether the man was a lunatic or normal in every sense of the word,

it was imperative for him to be vigilant in his duties because some South Africans vandalised and stole from graves on the advice of diviners and false prophets.

There were also those sacrilegious enough to sneak into graveyards and steal vases and tombstones, in some cases coffins, for resale in their communities. Some homeless men slept with prostitutes among the graves. The people familiar with the caretaker and his habits said he moved about unarmed, yet his tongue was vile and delivered curses to people he found among the graves.

The threat of curses frightened Aluwani. Regis saw that his fellow vagrant was scared; the man kept bumping into his back. Regis was also afraid though he didn't show it for the sake of encouraging his mate. Visiting graves by day or at night wasn't his custom.

As an African taught from childhood to revere dead ancestors and to shun graveyards deemed realms of demonic influence, Regis regarded crematoria and graveyards as anathema. But what spurred him tonight was the desire to rise out of his abject poverty. He felt a new life beckoned him. When he slid into vagrancy he had always felt that he would slip out of it. His inner being hadn't felt like a pauper. Unlike Aluwani and the others, it hurt him to irk a living from leftovers and scrap metal.

They were moving quietly when the roving torch beam caught a tombstone that stalled Regis. Aluwani bumped into him.

"What is it, Reggie?" Aluwani's voice was a frightened whisper.

Regis mutely kept the beam on the tombstone. Both stared at it:

Lerato Makgunda knee Hlobane

17/12/1968 - 27/01/ 2012

Gone but not forgotten

RIP

Made from polished black granite and engraved with delicate curlicues on the margins, the tombstone was expensive. A portrait half the size of a palm was inserted above her name. Regis stooped and looked closely at the photograph behind a glass panel. The

picture was indeed his aunt's, Lerato Makgunda knee Hlobane, taken at a light moment when she was smiling.

The current date being the thirtieth of January, he assumed she had died within the week. Dispassionately, in his mind he saw, with piercing clarity, the premier going for the most expensive casket in a funeral parlour, footing every funeral bill and gaining respect from the community.

Regis touched the wilted wreaths on the grave.

"That's a fresh grave, dunderhead. You said your father died two years ago."

"This is my aunt's grave." Regis' voice was steely. "Nobody bothered to inform me of her death or illness if ever she fell ill."

"Who would remember gutter waif like you?"

"Don't talk trash. She was a virtuous woman. Her price was far above rubies."

"If she wasn't a damn whore then she was a good woman," Aluwani said indifferently. "It's only prostitution that makes women undesirable."

"She was a good woman," he said quietly.

"You think it's a bad omen, scamp? Should we turn back?"

"We don't turn back, Alu. Not even the caretaker can scare us out of this mission."

"The dead buried the dead. Let's move on, scallywag. A right thinking man shouldn't worry about the dead. We're all on our way to one damn graveyard or another."

Reluctantly Regis straightened and walked on. But, swimming in dejection, he was no longer himself. To be a vagrant was one thing, but to be a forgotten one was very painful. He wondered what he had become in the eyes of his relations. Because he lived in Burgers Park, did they pass him for dead? Was he such an embarrassment that no one would want him to stand in their midst at a burial?

A few metres away, he came across yet another tombstone and stopped in his tracks. Again Aluwani bumped into him.

"What is it this time?" Aluwani demanded.

As before, Regis stared at the grave caught in the beam. The grave was of the same architecture as Lerato's:

Lebokang Makgunda
28/01/1963 - 28/01/2012
Job 38 v 11
RIP

“That’s my uncle’s grave... husband to my aunt.”

“So what? You think I don’t have relatives in this place? You’re damn losing focus, Reggie.”

“I’m shocked, Alu.”

“At forty-nine he died a boy.” Aluwani observed. “What happened to him?”

He shrugged in the dark. “A nameless disease wasted him. Doctors diagnosed nothing.” Sighing loudly, he shook his head.

“Maybe he died of scalma.”

“What’s that, Alu?”

“It’s an infectious disease that affects the nasal passages and the bronchia of horses. Nowadays people are dying from veterinary diseases.”

Regis saw the folly of pursuing the vagrant’s baseless supposition. “Our lineage is dwindling. Only a handful of Makgundas are left.”

“Polygamy will solve your problem. Once we pull the Binomial project, find a wife in every province. And boom... you’ve Makgundas in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and everywhere.”

Regis wished he could plug his ears against Aluwani’s voice. In that moment, standing still, the pick on his shoulder, he mourned his uncle, his face creased. However, his solace came from realising that the man had been ill, in pain and bedridden, stretching the limits of his endurance for far too long. It was only after he imagined his uncle in the cradling depths of Heaven, when he was able to move on. It amazed him that though he was trodden and considering robbing a bank, he could still afford to think about God.

Though the two had made a reconnaissance visit of Regis’ father’s grave in the afternoon, they wandered among the graves, lost. The old section was unsightly with grass and the shrubbery of

flowers, especially roses that had outgrown the graves. The darkness and the foliage frustrated their efforts. Many tombs appeared like his father's, but when they got closer they wandered on. Yet the section of the cemetery was the right one; it was far from the main gate, the caretaker's quarters and was almost central.

Whenever they arrived at the wrong grave Regis held his head in disorientation and Aluwani cursed him. Then, literally, they began moving in circles forwards and backwards, checking every grave in the vicinity in a systematic manner. After about twenty minutes of systematic searching, Regis found the grave. The tomb was overgrown, but of the same design and material as Lerato and Lebokang's.

Regis began digging immediately, attacking the earth as quietly as possible, but with vehemence, his mate holding the torch and looking out for the caretaker. The earth hadn't compacted yet; therefore the pick's blade sank with relative ease. When he stopped to catch his breath, Aluwani handed him the torch, shovelled out the loose earth and stretched his hand for the pick. That way they dug, alternatively shovelling and exchanging tools. The tombstone tilted gradually, threatening to fall into the pit. They uprooted it and dragged it out of the way.

Within a few minutes, they were knee-deep and still digging. The earth became softer but heavier from the dampness below the surface. The wetness came from the torrential rains that had pounded Pretoria from the beginning of the season. They applied themselves with diligence. The pit deepened. The wet earth soiled and tired them. Regis' lower back ached.

Still they dug. The earth became sedimentary and unbearably watery. But when their full heights vanished in the pit, it raised their eyebrows; something was wrong. Coffins were laid six feet below the surface, yet they had dug deeper than that, and the sedimentary formation they had reached was proof of ground that had never been disturbed.

"Looks like we're digging a mine shaft, nigger," Aluwani said disapprovingly, looking up at Regis holding the torch. "Are we going to dig till lava erupts?"

“Something is wrong, Aluwani.”

“You think the damn body and the coffin were stolen?”

“I don’t want to assume the worst.”

“Maybe your father didn’t die. Perhaps he’s alive somewhere.”

“Stop bluffing for once. The man died.” Then Regis remembered something. “Check the sides at a depth of about six feet. The casket was shelved in a side burrow, I guess.”

“Give me the torch.” Half-crouching, Aluwani inspected the sides. “Here’s the damn thing!”

“Stop shouting, you fool,” Regis hissed at him.

“What do I do now?”

“Get out. That’s my father’s body down there.”

“You think I might eat it?” Aluwani asked, scaling out.

First, Regis dug and then shovelled off the earth over the casket, the soil falling into the depths of the pit until he exposed the casket’s sagging lid. It surprised him that the coffin was almost intact as if it had been buried a couple of months previously. It’s golden and silvery furnishings glittered in the dark.

“What do we do, scoundrel?”

“We open it, Alu; that’s what we came to do, isn’t it?”

“Maggots and faggots must still be feasting on the body.”

“Shut up and get down here. If you stand the other side we’ll pull it open.”

“Are you not going to talk to his damn spirit first? Let him know who you are.”

“I’m not a *sangoma* and I didn’t kill him. The man has nothing against me. He’s a spirit; he knows my struggles.”

Taking care to avoid stepping on the coffin that would surely give in to his weight, Aluwani lowered himself into the pit and stood astride it, like Regis. His left hand holding the torch, he slid his right hand under the lid as did Regis with both hands. The sides of the coffin were nothing but termite-destroyed crumbling panels. Hinges, nails and dovetails heaved and broke loose. They placed the lid outside the pit.

Aluwani beamed the body.

Tankiso Makgunda's remains lay in the disintegrating casket. His burial clothes, a three-piece dark suit, a white shirt and a striped necktie, were in an awry state but largely intact. Dark eye sockets stared at them. All that remained of his cheeks, temples and nose were shady hollows exposing bone and teeth. The fingers were skeletal. Regis had anticipated a repulsive stench, but the odour wasn't that acrid. The remains smelled like a mixture of cow dung, damp ochre and mildew.

"Nice shoes," Aluwani commented. "A damn dead man wears G & D shoes while his son wears trash. He's resting in peace. He doesn't need them."

Regis looked at the shoes. The pair was still laced and sound, which nearly tempted him to remove them. Regis' shoes were worn-out. "I can't steal from my father's corpse. That would be the worst disrespect."

"But we came to steal, didn't we? Aren't you supposed to look like a gentleman when we rob the bank? If the man had died of cholera or foot-and-mouth his shoes would've been dangerous. You told me pneumonia killed him while you were in prison."

"Let's find the pistol. Don't touch my father's shoes." He crouched and began rummaging underneath the remains from the head downwards.

"You sure there's a damn pistol in this dung?"

"They put it in the coffin. Search that side."

"My hands aren't touching any dead body, Regis. I don't want to horde evil spirits."

Regis drew a pistol beneath the body and straightened. "I told you." He held it to the light.

"This is an old thing, Regis! You think it can still drop a man?"

"It can drop an elephant. This is a breech-loading firearm. The Swiss Army used it between 1900 and 1949."

"Where do we get the bullets... from a military museum in Stockholm?"

Regis struggled with the magazine and pulled it out. He emptied three bullets onto his palm. "Three bullets. That should be adequate."

“It depends on the damn number of people we must shoot. What if there’s a shootout with the police?”

“We’ll try to avoid bloodshed.”

“Then we’ll be killed, Reggie... kaput. We’ll lie in the street like Mussolini.”

“You said everyone was on their way to a graveyard. It’s either the robbery or police gunfire will put us out of our misery. Any outcome guarantees our freedom.”

“Regis, you’re worse than anal fissures.”

Chapter 29

South African weather was unpredictable in the rainy season. In the morning it was sunny though partially overcast. In the afternoon a storm had raged in Pretoria. Now at eight o'clock of the same day, the first of February, it was unbearably cold.

Moagi Makgunda, a solitary figure in an overcoat, a woollen hat and scarf, rocked in a chair by the main lounge's lit marble fireplace. The clothes felt better than the room's air-con he had turned off because it made him sneeze. He was reading the letter he found in Lebokang's hand. The letter troubled him, but he read it for the umpteenth time without an expression on his face. Lebokang's voice rang in his ears as if his late brother read the letter himself:

To Whom It May Concern

It's a pity I have addressed this final letter of mine to whoever finds it and may care to follow its one request. I addressed it as such because I could not address it to my young brother, Moagi Makgunda.

The matter I write about is African, spiritual and hard to prove. Though my illness is severe, I'm within all my mental faculties. I'm dying and Moagi is the author of my death. It may sound absurd, but it is nothing but the truth. Perhaps if I had survived I might have found evidence or tried to prove categorically that he has jeopardised our lives.

As I write this letter our brother's son, Regis, wallows in inexplicable vagrancy in the streets of Pretoria. His father, Tankiso, must be turning in his grave. Again my brother Moagi is the culprit. Regis' life plummeted when Moagi filed an attempted murder charge alleging that Regis attempted to kill his own girlfriend, Agnes Lamola, in the premier's Randlord Mansion.

Though no independent confirmation of Moagi's claim was made and the witness, Agnes, was ruled hostile by a court of law, my brother saw to it that Regis was ostracised. At the time I was also foolish enough to believe Moagi. To this day, January 28th, only Moagi and Agnes know what transpired at the mansion two and a half years ago.

About my failing health, which has boggled doctors and brought me to the point of death, let it be known that there's a fatal spell troubling the family. Moagi acquired it. (Don't ask me where, ask him). It makes him prosper but brings damnation to the rest of us. I'm not jealousy of his businesses, philanthropic endeavours or high position in the Government of South Africa. I'm against the use of dangerous juju for self-advancement. I'm against the sacrifice of other people's lives. I'm against the terminal agony that dogged me until today, my birthday, the day I die.

Some of you may recall that about eighteen years ago Moagi was a struggling, childless grocer. Some of you may also have heard rumours that he was visiting unscrupulous diviners in Zululand. That was when he acquired the evil spell and members of the family began dying. I will not list the victims of this spell stretching eighteen years back because I'm short of breath and energy.

I cannot refuse to die, or like Hezekiah, sweet-talk the Lord into extending my years on earth. For years I have endured pain and injections. I don't think the blood left in my veins is more than a quart. I will die and meet my lovely wife, Lerato. But what bothers me is leaving Regis a pauper and the remaining Makgundas at the mercy of the devil in the family. If I become a ghost it would be to check on Regis. His father, Tankiso, told me years ago that Regis received a sacred prophecy.

My one request is that you, the reader and bearer of this letter, should read it aloud at my burial and challenge Moagi Makgunda to comment.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Lebokang Makgunda

“God has seen your tears and heard your prayers,” Moagi said stonily to the letter, dramatically quoting Gregory Rasputin’s famous line. He smiled at the irony of the situation, and added: “Fear not, brother, Regis will not die.”

Without looking, he placed the letter in the fire.

Chapter 30

The second night after Heidi Gaynor's arrival at the Randlord Mansion, Moagi Makgunda and Divine Kakudji watched the new arrival undressing for bed in the bedroom of her quarters. The images were pornographic, yet the men watched them deadpan.

The previous night they had made their inaugural voyeurism of her. But they hadn't seen much to stimulate their interests. Returning from an exerting tour of the Voortrekker Monument and its museum, she had removed her clothes, thrown herself on the bed and slept on the bedspread in her underwear. On noticing that she was fast asleep, Moagi and Divine called it a day and made a date for the morrow.

Now, the second night, they were watching her in the premier's residential office at the back of the mansion. Sipping a cup of coffee, the billionaire sat tacit in a padded chair, his eyes shifting from one screen to the other, the hungry eyes of a man keen to observe every detail on the girl's figure. The Congolese stood beside him like a tree stump, Heidi's salacious figure and tendencies mesmerising him.

Heidi appeared on two twenty-one inch monitors mounted in the wall, and a thirty-two inch plasma screen on a desk. Three hidden CCTV cameras spied on Heidi in her bedroom. On the three monitors in the office, the two men saw her frontal and side images.

She removed her clothes almost sensuously as though she was an amateur stripper aware of the eyes on her, draping them one after the other on the backrest of a bedside chair. Nude except for a lacy panty, she sat on a corner of the bed, her posture forlorn. But through her almond, innocent and inviting eyes, she seemed to be staring directly at them.

"You think she has discovered the camera, Divine?"

"Only an expert can find the cameras, sir."

"What do you think she's doing staring like that?"

“Maybe she’s meditating, sir. She may be thinking how lucky she’s to work for a billionaire.”

“How can you be sure she isn’t looking at the camera?”

Just then she turned her face and looked at the wall.

“Zoom her breasts,” Moagi instructed the dwarf without taking his eyes from a monitor.

Divine Kakudji went to a computer station in a corner and poked a keyboard. A close-up of Heidi’s pear-shaped breasts filled the monitors.

Moagi swallowed hard. “Why’s she seated there?”

“I don’t understand Europeans, sir.”

“How old do you think she is, Divine?”

“She’s between sixteen and twenty-one, sir.”

“Seventeen,” he said noncommittally. “The girl is still budding.”

“But the region between her navel and pubic area is distended,” the dwarf observed.

“You think she’s pregnant?”

“She’s slept with too many men for someone her age.”

“She’s fatally beautiful, but she’s far from a nun.”

Heidi stood up. A close-up of her midsection filled the monitors.

Divine Kakudji poked another set of commands on the keyboard and her full images appeared. She was touching and squeezing her bosom. She fell backwards on the bed and lay still, her feet on the floor, her hands fondling her breasts. After a while, a hand slid into the front part of her panties, her legs drawing apart. Her lips moved mournfully.

Moagi Makgunda nodded satisfaction to himself.

“She’s a girl of notorious tendencies,” the dwarf said from the computer station.

“She’s undomesticated. The Devil wouldn’t admit her in Hell.”

“Why, sir?”

“She might spoil others or detract him.”

Both laughed but quickly fell silent on seeing that she was wriggling out of her underwear.

“She’s very pretty,” Divine Kakudji observed.

“Her beauty makes me numb.”

On the screens, Heidi Gaynor flung her under garment towards the central camera, rose and crossed to a closet. The angle was blind to two cameras, but one spied on her unzipping one of her bags on a shelf in the closet. The two men waited quietly, curious. After a while she turned. She was carrying two longitudinal items, one purplish and crystal, the other black and segmented, and a small bottle of lotion.

“What’s she carrying, sir?”

“Two extra-large dildos and a lubricant, Divine. What’s wrong with your eyes?”

Heidi Gaynor placed pillows against the headboard and propped herself on them.

“Sir, we’re very lucky.”

Chapter 31

Having nothing to occupy her and enjoying the freedom to do as she pleased as granted by Moagi Makgunda, Heidi Gaynor stood at the stables and watched the stable master and a hand strap a saddle and stirrups on a horse. Standing in the sun outside a lazy-man door with the top half open, she admired the black horse the men had selected for her.

She was in a black cowgirl hat, an Apple Guipuire purple lace crop-top and a pair of black stretcher jean trousers tucked in flat-heeled Mohican-style boots. Her midriff was a white sash. A ring hung from her navel. The stable master and the hand stole glances at her exposed mid-section.

The stalls held a dozen horses, neighing excitedly and chewing hay. Her knowledge of horses convinced her all of them were thoroughbreds capable of winning races in Cape Town, Durban or the Arab Emirates. The animals were elegantly tall bundles of sinewy muscles. The sweet smell of horses and their dung hovered in the air.

The stable master and his hand adjusted the saddle until it was between the withers and the horse's croup. Then, drawing the horse by the reins, the assistant led him to the door, opened it and drew the animal outside. Heidi moved backwards to give them way, and also from fear. Being someone who hadn't touched a horse or attempted horse-riding, the animal's colour, eyes and size frightened her.

The stable master exited the stall and closed the door behind him. He joined Heidi and his subordinate, and told her the name of the horse was Black Pepper. Except for his greying girth, he was totally black. Following the master's instructions, she went to the horse, which stepped backwards nervously. She called him by his name, massaged him between his left shoulder and the withers and gradually moved to his muzzle.

The horse warmed to her scent and touch to the satisfaction of the two men. They helped her mount and re-adjusted the stirrups. The assistant towing the horse, the chestnut bore her gently around

the stables, the master walking beside her and instructing her to keep her weight on the stirrups. He urged her to relax and flow with the horse's movements. Her fear of the animal waned.

After about half an hour she was riding on her own around the stables and patting the animal. The stable master gave her the thumbs-up sign. His assistant opened the main stable gate for her and she rode out gay and smiling.

At a canter, she rode westwards towards the woods in the Randlord property. When she crossed the flower-, amphora- and palm-tree flanked driveway stretching from the property's main gate to the mansion, she looked back over her shoulder and saw the two men waving at her. She waved back gaily and rode on until she came to a dirt road that took her to tall eucalyptus trees through whose boughs the wind whizzed coyly and rays of the morning sun filtered.

Moagi Makgunda was in his administrative office at number 30 Simmonds St in Johannesburg's Marshalltown. The children were in school. Katherine was alleged to be in a cocoon in her bedroom and still mourning the recent deaths of their relatives, Lerato and Lebokang Makgunda, of whom Moagi said she had loved and had been very close to.

Heidi's office, which was part of her residential quarters, was being furnished. Before she left for the stables, a truck brought a glass-surfaced L-shaped teak desk with two matching visitors' chairs, an upright two-door refrigerator with an in-built freezer and some filing cabinets. More furniture, two laptops and other things would be delivered in the afternoon.

From the look of things, she knew she was secure in her newfound position and she would be at the mansion for as long as the billionaire lived. At forty-one, the premier was young and looked healthy. Many years lay ahead of him. If at all something threatened her well-being; Mr Scott Randall, the agent whose intervention brought her into the business mogul's world, would advise her accordingly.

She was in constant communication with the silver-haired man, the man whose semi-nudity she saw at the Château Richelieu. It was unbelievable how they had met, and how this man who had appeared

debauched in her eyes, was now more of a father and a godfather to her.

Since her brief stint at a private secretarial college in London, she often chatted with him using the Internet browser on her cell-phone. On coming to South Africa, her boss had obtained her a local roaming SIM card. Outside Moagi and Seidu Amissah, Mr Scott Randall was the closest thing to a relative. So far she had written to him about her arrival, the great reception the premier gave her and the pleasantness of the environment she was living in, and thanked him opulently. In his responses, the agent always said he was happy for her and stressed that she was in good hands.

A footpath enticed Heidi. She steered the horse from the dirt road onto the snaking path, and thought about Seidu Amissah, the chauffeur who fetched her from the airport and took her to the Voortrekker Monument. When she strolled around the mansion before the chef served her breakfast, she found the Ghanaian washing one of the premier's cars on a bay behind the house. They had talked about the weather and the opulence of the residence, and then she had asked him in a whisper if her master had flirted with his domestic staff. The Ghanaian assured her the mogul was a proper gentleman who loved his wife and children.

His response evoked her childhood memories in Cubitt Town in the Isle of Dogs. Father Claude Gaynor was a good man seemingly. Seemingly he loved his wife, Emma, and their children, Renee and Fiona. The family was seemingly stable, reverent of God and, on the face of it, happy. But libidinous jackals lurked in Father Gaynor and his son.

From her encounter with the Gaynors, something inside her had begun taking defensive stances whenever family men showed her kindness, or wore their gentility in her presence like mayoral medals. Therefore something deep inside her that refused to be subdued warned her to treat Moagi Makgunda with caution. Yet another part of her inner being tried to convince her she was a lucky girl with no reason to detest the mogul. It said her fears were unfounded, and that an opportunistic door had opened and she had entered it.

Here she was, saddled on Black Pepper, a thoroughbred, adventuresome and carefree far from the royal and high-status sexual pervers of Europe. She had no reason to be sad or to live in the past.

Away from the canopy of the eucalyptus trees, the variety of trees along the footpath captivated her. Unlike British and French forests, which were mostly collections of coniferous trees, the diversity and density of the indigenous trees in this part of the property spurred her to ride on. She wished she had brought her camera and photographed the colourful birds singing in the trees.

The vegetation became typically savannah, punctuated with sprouting conical anthills that stood out like natural plinths. She pulled the reins, stopping Black Pepper. The place was serene and suitable for solitude and meditation, she told herself looking about. She would ride here whenever she could, to sit under the shade of a tree or on an anthill and tell herself, really hammer it into her own head, that she had no reason to worry or think about the past.

Chapter 32

Katherine breathed heavily beside him, lost in sleep in their matrimonial bed. Moagi gazed at a dimly-lit chandelier, recalling the turkey and the horse anomaly. The foiled attacks were evil omens. Something was wrong and the attempted bestiality was the sign. His wife had demanded a logical explanation. He didn't have any except that the animals were somehow mentally deranged.

If the problem had gone unresolved the remnants of the Makgunda lineage would've perished, and he too would eventually follow suit. He had blamed the abnormality on the Sicilian, Mr Scott Randall, for taking far too long to deliver the British girl he promised.

The premier recalled his clandestine trip to a forest shrine in Nigeria. He remembered staring in awe at a Yorùbá diviner; a nuance of delight rising within him. It had appeared he was at the last port of call for his misery, and the *babalawo* before him, Babalawo Arugogo, would prove a blessing incarnate. The recollection was picturesque:

Babalawo Arugogo was completely naked except for a dirty loincloth barely covering his private parts. The diviner wasn't in the customary garb Moagi Makgunda had seen South African seers and traditional herbalists in. If Moagi's feelings were anything to go by, it appeared this was a momentous afternoon under a canopy of the Equatorial Rain Forest, a day that would revamp his desperate life.

The diviner's face was so smeared in red and white ochre that it appeared like a nyau zoomorphic mask. Sitting on a low bewn stool under a towering iroko tree in a forest to the west of Òyótúnjì Village in Oyo State, Nigeria, the man chanted divinatory incantations. Because he pointed at the heavens, the forest and the trunk of the sacred iroko tree behind him, Moagi guessed he was evoking Yorùbá gods to join them.

"Are you material for the reception of kola-nuts and palm oil?" The Yorùbá Ifá hermit asked his visitor in English. "The leaves of the cocoyam spread to welcome the harvest that ruins them."

"I come in peace, if that's what you want to know."

The seer raised a silencing hand. "That isn't for a mortal to say; the gods will tell me."

The seer-cum-medicine man sat amid nondescript paraphernalia comprising, among other things, tortoise and cowry shells in clusters, concoctions in dirty bottles, mummified hands and feet of baboons and gorillas, beaded gourds of various sizes, a dozen wooden idols with grotesque countenances.

As he chanted, resigned to the spirits and almost incognisant of Moagi, his voice delusional and pitched, he rearranged the idols near him and wiped their faces as if the action was of vital essence to summoning the gods. Still chanting ordinarily and in melodies, he picked a circular wooden tray, archaic and engraved with human and animal figures, and placed it between them. With a pointed tapper decorated with the same engravings as the tray, he tapped the latter rhythmically.

Having silenced the cello-like orchestra of twitting sparrows, cooing doves, chirping cicadas, and the cheerful cock-a-doodling of distant guinea fowls, the man's chants travelled far in every direction. Though the wind whizzing through the lofty canopy reeked of humus, the occasional wafts that left the diviner in Moagi's direction smelled of urine, odorous armpits and faeces. Layers of dirt discoloured the diviner's torso. His greying hair grew in unsightly logs cascading like sisal strips of carpets to his chest and shoulders. Despite the juju and charms and spirits at his disposal, the man, sere and wrinkled, was withered past rejuvenation, real or cosmetic.

The diviner suddenly fell silent, catching his breath. His face pallid, he picked a piece of white chalk from the ground and drew a circle around his left eye. Moagi shifted his weight on the reed mat a pace from the hermit.

"How did a mortal find me?" the seer began, switching from Yorùbá to perfect English again, his eyes boring into his visitor. "I speak many languages; Orunmila is an ominous linguist."

"A sangoma in KwaZulu-Natal referred me. She tried to assist me for three years before she recommended you two months ago."

The diviner dipped a hand in a clay pot and drew a handful of cowries. "Sacred sixteen cowries," he said in reference to the handful. "We call them owo mfrindinlogun." He cast them on the tray at his feet and studied the configuration the pieces fell in. "You're twenty-three years old." His tone was accusatory. "From your mother's back until about a year ago you were penniless,

desperate and insignificant. You're married and lonely. It takes effort for you to bed your wife."

"It is true, Babalawo Arugogo."

"In every society women have a low opinion of failures. You lead a life of perpetual obscurity and constant struggle. Your wife regrets marrying you."

Moagi looked at the ground. "It is true."

"You've been married for two years. Your seed on your wife is like rain falling in a cobbled graveyard."

"It is true. I suffer from a low sperm count."

"That's what doctors say. What doctors say isn't what Yorùbá gods and Orunmila see. Ask anyone, Ifá insight is the highest form of divination." He picked the bones and cast them again. "Welcome to the iroko of freedom. I see the reason for your quest. I see the foreigner who'll lead you to the attainment of your dreams. His spirit wanders on desolate and snowy plains like a lumbering gorilla."

Moagi felt meritorious warmth rising up his spine.

The diviner looked at an idol and then at Moagi. "The gods will bless you." He made an emphatic pause. "With immeasurable wealth and children for the perpetuation of the riches, they'll bless you. Depending on how you commit and resign yourself to a task, you can be richer than the Windsor family."

Moagi looked at him inquisitively.

"You're young enough to make up for the ground you've lost. A life of grandeur is yours for the taking if you aren't hesitant. You'll be able to buy and sell the Sultan of Brunei."

"What is the task, Babalawo?"

"You're the proprietor of a small grocer's shop in the suburb of Mamelodi. Your wife is the shopkeeper. By this time next year you'll be spectacularly rich. But you must be ready to take my charms and follow my advice."

"I'm ready to take the charms and the advice."

"I give them to brave people. Are you brave?"

He nodded.

"Speak... for the benefit of our audience," the diviner said, gesturing at the idols.

"I'm brave, Babalawo Arugogo."

"I give my charms to people who recognise no taboos. The only people to me are the mad ones; those who're mad to make a name, mad for recognition, mad to be outstanding in their endeavours. Are you worried about breaking taboos?"

"It depends," he said inadequately. "For instance, I cannot kill my children, if I'd them, or sleep with my mother."

The diviner chuckled. "But can you sleep with your daughters?"

Moagi gaped. "A thousand times, no! I can't even imagine it."

"Your spirit is weak. The wandering foreigner's soul will strengthen it."

Moagi gritted his teeth, stifling an outrage. "You mean a stranger will embolden me so that I can lie down with my children or my mother?"

The man laughed again, derisively. "For a weakling like you to be bold and attract the right favour in your life; for you to reap what the gods shelved in your favour, you need a seasoned guardian. Every successful businessperson is dependent on their guardian angel."

"What am I suppose to do?"

"Orunmila demands good character and honesty from me. If you trust me, I'll bring your prayers into fruition. In return you'll shower my gods with praise and spoil them with special ambrosia, that's all I demand." From another gourd, he drew two ripe kola-nuts and gave them to Moagi. "Now listen closely. Among the seven hills where Ibadan is flung like debris, you'll find the Government Hospital. In the vicinity of the hospital is an old cemetery. In the western corner of this cemetery is a grave whose tombstone is engraved in a foreign language. You cannot miss it."

"What language is on the tombstone, Babalawo Arugogo?"

"It's written in Russian: Feodor Peotr Alexandrova, 1910 to 1967. Orunmila will guide you."

"Who's Orunmila?"

"He is a prophet. He developed and spread Ifá divination. He has neither parents nor lineage and is only second to Olodumare—God. Like Melchizedek, he is no longer with us, yet he remains with us."

"What will I do at Feodor's grave?"

"Too much liberty!" the diviner roared. "You harass me with too many questions!"

"I'm sorry."

Arugogo calmed down. He gathered the cowries and threw them on the tray again before continuing. "Feodor was an antics and art dealer from Moscow. In

1941 he fled Russia with his wife and children. He was against conscription into the Red Army and found refuge in Cairo. Rumours of an abundance of artefacts and traditional carvings in Nigeria drew him to Ibadan in 1944. But no one brought him the sacred artefacts he thought he would find. African curios aren't for sale. The man then established himself on Yorùbá soil as an estate agent, banker, safari owner, restaurateur and many other things."

Moagi sighed discreetly, wondering if the impromptu lesson was necessary and if he hadn't erred dismally by travelling all the way from Pretoria for the consultation. Perhaps, like the dead migrant Russian buried at the hospital, he would be rich. The fear of being maddened by a lunatic dissipated the mendacious feeling of achievement.

"Feodor wasn't a gifted man. Neither was he remarkably educated. But Feodor had secrets, which they entombed with him according to his last will and testament. You'll exhume the secrets lying beneath his remains in the graveyard. Take them to your country. Build a shrine for them in your house. The secrets will take care of your fears. You shall know no taboos and know wealth."

Mindful of his fruitless marriage, Moagi understood he had no cause to be afraid. He nodded.

"Speak... for the benefit of Orunmila and our audience. My witnesses must hear."

"If the benefit is immeasurable wealth like you say, I can try." He opened his palm, revealing the kola-nuts.

"Put them in the Russian's grave as compensation for the items you'll remove. Kola-nuts are a gesture of peace and friendship. No person in his right mind wants to invite the wrath of a dead man. When do you visit the grave?"

"Tonight, Babalawo Arugogo."

"The gods my witnesses, should you go against your word doves will beget eagles. In one day your face will wrinkle and your hair will turn grey. Should that happen, I'll petition the wind, thunder, lightning and the Magaliesberg to kill you."

Moagi wondered how the Magaliesberg, the sprawling range of mountains to the north of Pretoria, could possibly kill him. "Babalawo Arugogo, you've my word."

The priest's eyes swept the clusters of idols. He rose and meandered carefully through effigies and other curios until he reached a periphery of the shrine holding

an isolated collection of carvings. Picking one idol, he turned and made his way to his stool. Moagi fixed his eyes on the carving in his hands.

Resuming his seat, Arugogo placed the carving in front of Moagi. "Welcome to Nigeria, the land of one thousand six hundred and eleven gods. I'm entrusting you with Konté from Benin. He has a mind and a personality of his own. How do you please a gorilla?"

The carving was stout, knee-high and adorned with ethnic engravings of fish and snails. A spectacular and disquieting feature of the idol was a heaven-pointing phallus. Agog, Moagi looked closely at the idol, thinking. "You give it fresh apples."

"He needs special ambrosia. For that reason, you shall bear three angels. They shall not lack anything for as long as you live and Konté and the portrait you'll find in the grave are in your house." He paused. "Find Konté pretty young women now and then. After several years, omens shall tell you that he needs a permanent beauty. You will find him a petite blonde in Europe. But if I were you, I wouldn't wait for the omens."

Chapter 33

Running and screaming, a conviction came upon Katherine Makgunda that she would die in a mansion she had cherished as a God-given blessing. Her death seemed inevitable. In this mansion she had recited and sang passages from the Book of Psalms and Proverbs. Now this mansion that had assumed the air of a sanctuary over the years, this mansion that was her Holy of Holies and God's blessings incarnate in her life, was suddenly a prison and a death-trap.

A drunken white man chased her relentlessly in the house. His heavily bearded face was cadaverous, his eyes narrow and piercing. A small bald patch on the crown of his head appeared like a poisoned oasis thinning the hair immediately around it, but failing to affect the thick long dark hair growing in increasing abundance further from the alopecia. The hair ended in a neat trim around his shoulders. His clothes were early twentieth century garb; a flapping black buttonless shirt and a pair of grey baggy trousers.

Brandishing a curved sword in one hand, the man pursued her through the passages and stairways of Randlord Mansion, gradually ripping her clothes off with his other hand as she ran. He pounced on her until she was in nothing but a torn brassiere and panties. Often he pinned her to the floor or the balusters, but she managed to wriggle and break free. She kept running, screaming desperately and shouting for help, her voice echoing in the mansion.

It appeared no one beside her and the reptilian brute was in the house or nearby. Though she had found many inner doors and the main one locked, she wasn't going to stop and accord the man an opportunity to kill her sheepishly. Perhaps somewhere was an unlocked door or a window to let her out. Perhaps her screams would rouse some maids or reach some armed guards patrolling the garden. From some of the rooms she tried to escape into, mournful sounds emanating within them baffled and frightened her.

Then she remembered the gun cabinet in a passage closet. If only she could reach the cabinet and unlock it before the man got to her, she would shoot him dead or at least cripple him enough to make good her escape. But the cabinet and her pursuer were behind her.

Panting and tired, she ran to the master bedroom. Moagi usually kept a firearm in a chest of drawers by the bed. As soon as she entered, the man burst in after her and cornered her before she could reach the chest of drawers.

"Praskovia," the man began, "why do you flee your husband?"

She tried desperately to cover her breasts and pubic area. "I'm not Praskovia. You aren't my husband."

He laughed. "My dear wife, Praskovia Fedorovna Dubrovina, have you lost your mind?"

"I've told you I'm not your wife. Leave me alone!"

He laughed again. "It is I, your husband—Father Gregory Rasputin. Are you forgetting you've a husband, Gregory Yefimovich Rasputin?"

"I'm Katherine. My husband is Moagi—"

"Don't waste your breath, my good wife. Why must we always make love after a struggle?"

"Go away! Leave me alone or you'll be tried for this!"

"Is there a law in Russia that forbids a married couple to be intimate? Did I not marry you before a priest? Call our children, Praskovia. Ask them who you're or what am I to you."

"You and I've children?"

"My dear Praskovia let me refresh your memory. God gave us three fruits through your womb. You can't tell me you don't remember Dmitri, Matryona and Varvara? What kind of a mother are you?"

The sword raised in one hand, his other hand lifted in the manner of a priest about to utter benediction, he approached her. "Don't be hysterical. It's not decent to alert Pokrovskoye and possibly Siberia that we're about to be intimate. I'm a holy man of God—a priest not a rapist."

She pressed herself in the corner and slowly sank to the floor. He fumbled with the front of his trousers and drew his member—a distressed puff adder. Katherine screamed with all her vigour and woke up, the adrenalin in her body seething.

Katherine was groggy and disoriented, yet she was relieved she had been dreaming. Indeed she had screamed. Often Moagi was the first one to hear even the slightest whimper she made and would wake her up. But he hadn't despite the noise she had made.

Desperately in need of her husband's protection and affection, she groped for him on his side of the bed, hoping to feel his athletic body, shake him awake and narrate the enigmatic dream to him. Her hand encountered no obstacle in the form his body. His place was cold.

She propped herself on her elbows, switched a shaded bedside lamp and looked about. The Holy Bible lay open on the headboard. On retiring to bed, she had read a chapter in the Book of Psalms and left it open for continuation the following morning. Now waking up and finding the Bible open exactly where she had opened it testified that she had woken in reality. Yet she couldn't explain her bleariness, disorientation and weariness. Perhaps she was still dreaming. Was it possible for a dreamer in a nightmare to differentiate between reality and illusion?

Light shown through frosted panels of a wall demarcating the bedroom and the en suite bathroom. Tall vases and pots holding arum lilies and poinsettias stood near the wall. Normally she would smell the flowers' scent from a distance on waking up, but her olfactory perception seemed numb. A continuous splash suggested that water was running into a sink in the bathroom.

"Honey!" she called in the direction of the bathroom. "Moagi, dear!"

No answer. A digital watch on the headboard flickered 02:20 hrs.

"Moagi, dear!" She called again, her voice now tremulous.

With much effort, she climbed out of bed, stood up and staggered in a short, lacy nightdress towards the en suit bathroom. Things appeared in pairs to her. Everything about her was lethargic. By what mechanism had the weariness she experienced in the dream caught up with her in real life? Her knees threatened to crumple under her weight and she was faint. Had she woken from the nightmare or she was still a character in an illusion?

There was a chance she had woken from the nightmare; equal to the likelihood this was a continuation of the dream. If she drank, she would've thought she had gone to bed intoxicated and had woken tipsy in the middle of the night. Katherine was a staunch Christian.

She neither smoked nor took any alcoholic beverage. Obstinate abstinence was her guiding principle.

“Honey,” she called softly again. “Where’re you, dear?”

She shuffled towards the bathroom, residual fear from the nightmare clamping her down; at least that was how she interpreted her fright. However, in the back of her mind she told herself that if her waking wasn’t an accomplished fact she had better keep a wary eye for her tormentor.

She reached the entrance to the bathroom after a struggle, glanced behind her nervously and entered. Moagi wasn’t in the bathroom. Water was running in a sink. She crossed over to close it, but on the way she knocked a hollow porcelain cat holding their toothbrushes on a shelf. The moulding shattered on the tiled floor. She scolded the clumsiness in her movements, picked the brushes among the shards and placed them on the shelf. A maid would remove the pieces in the morning.

The desire to find her husband pushed her. Where was he? She emerged from the bathroom, crossed to the door, turned the knob and stepped into a passage. The mansion was quiet. In the passage, she tried to check her faculties. She was Katherine and not the strangely named woman like her pursuer had alleged in the dream. The passage was familiar and nothing was surreal about the house, herself or her thoughts. But the self-assessment was absurd in itself. It felt like one in a morbid asseveration declaring oneself sane.

Where was her husband, she asked herself dismally, but all her thoughts dovetailed into the dream—a death-trap mansion devoid of her family, the servants and guards. Ever since she gave birth to the children, Moagi had made it his custom to check on the girls at night. In the countable instances she had followed him, she had found him tucking blankets under their chins, kissing them on the cheeks as they slept, or adjusting the air-conditioners in their rooms. The habit was his second nature every night, and for that she was proud of him.

In the passage, she attempted to maintain a calm demeanour in case she wasn’t dreaming, and bumped into a maid. As mistress of the mansion it wouldn’t augur well with her personality to show the workers fear. Rumours would fly in Pretoria that the house was

haunted or she needed exorcism before she could fully enjoy her husband's wealth. The maid apologised.

But the wish to steady herself didn't turn into a reflex command in her body. She continued to walk in the same clumsy manner. Her vision blurred time and again. The dim light from concealed bulbs in the passage worked against her. The mansion was too shadowy for her liking.

In the dream, the passages had been dark and she hadn't acquitted herself with courage, she recalled. She had screamed and ran and begged for her life. And she was still cowardly, which suggested she might still be dreaming despite her convictions. Perhaps she was alone with a killer in the mansion, and God had tried to warn her in the nightmare.

Often groping, her eyes closed since her eyelids felt like mercury, she bumped into walls, vases and tore down wall-hangings in her awkward progress. Shards of terracotta, strewn flowers and broken picture frames lay in her wake. Where was she going? She was edging to the girls' bedrooms to find out if her daughters were alive and well and her husband was with them, or if at all they were still in the house. Perchance Eula, Eunice or Eurydice's voice or hug would fish her out of her present frame of mind into reality as she knew it.

After a struggle, she reached Eula's bedroom, which was the closest to the master's. She turned the knob and opened the door. The little girl had left the lights on. Katherine crossed to her in her awkward gaiety. Eula was snug, alone and lost in sleep in her bed. A Teddy-bear and the small violin lay companionably next to her. The bear lay facing up, the violin's neck between its legs, the instrument's scroll covering the bear's face.

Katherine thought it was by coincidence that Eula had left the two in that position. But when she looked around, she was shocked to see Eula's rag and plastic dolls, about a dozen pairs, in coital positions. They were on the *escritoire*, tables, on two reading chairs and on the carpet. She looked at the dolls in disbelief. The only explanation was that she was dreaming.

On her way out, she turned the lights off, a reflexive, responsible act, plunging the room into darkness. But Eula suddenly sat up

screaming, sweating and shivering. Katherine turned the lights on and rushed to her. Eula was suddenly quiet and staring. She sat by the edge of the bed and embraced her daughter. But she noticed a large urine puddle on the bed's bottom sheet.

The girl had bed-wetted, which wasn't typical of her. She assumed the turkey attack was haunting her in her dreams. In the morning, if this weren't a dream, she would discuss with her husband taking her and Eurydice for psychological counselling. Within a moment, Eula had fallen asleep on her shoulder. Katherine placed her gently on the bed, away from the wet patch, and covered her with a sheet.

She would return and change her nightdress and linen once she saw Moagi. Where was her husband? She left the bed and turned the lights off again. This time Eula remained sound asleep. She closed the door quietly and hobbled on.

Three doors down the passage, she entered Eunice's room. Her daughter lay fast asleep but semi-exposed in her bed. She wanted to cross over and cover her, but had a second thought; she would do so after establishing where her husband was. The room was mosquito-repellent and air-conditioned, just like the rest of the mansion, which rendered Eunice's exposure trivial. Moagi was her priority at the moment.

She made for Eurydice's bedroom. In every muscle fibre in her body, she felt the strain of walking and wished she had rather stayed in bed instead of worrying about the whereabouts of an adult somewhere in a secure mansion. The door to Eurydice's bedroom appeared before her, like the passage and the rest of the things in her view, dancing in her drowsy sight.

Between Eurydice's room and Eunice's bedroom, she only knocked down one potted flower. It didn't break but spewed soil and water on the floor. Assuming her entry would be as fruitless as the previous ones; she turned the doorknob and staggered in, but only made two paces and stopped in bewilderment, gaping.

Moagi and Eurydice lay naked. Katherine blinked thrice. Father and daughter lay side by side, intertwined and fast asleep on top of a

bedspread. Both snored lightly, ostensibly weary. Moagi loosely held a scruffy white handkerchief in his right hand.

The piquancy of finding the two in bed stung her senses numb. But she refuted the fact. Moagi wouldn't stoop that low to see the nudity of his daughter, worse still sleep with her—not even at gunpoint. Something was wrong with her sight. The absurdity was irrefutable confirmation that she was in a dreamy world, a world so kaleidoscopic that she had almost thought she was walking in reality. Rasputin had to be somewhere in the mansion. Perhaps he was close by and waiting for an opportune moment to attack her with the sword or the adder.

Then it occurred to her that since she was dreaming, she might as well be gloating at Gregory Rasputin in bed with Eurydice, but disguised as her husband. In the first part of the dream prior to her illusionary waking, he had anguished her with inexorable pursuit and by tearing her clothes off and clamping her savagely several times. Now it appeared his *modus operandi* had altered; she seemed to know ambivalently that he had resorted to souring and defiling her sensibilities.

Caution prompted her to step backwards instinctively, putting distance between her and the reposing threat. Her eyes glued on the figures on the bed, she moved back, stepping across the passage and then across the staircase landing, which she overstepped in her blind retreat.

Katherine shrieked as she tumbled backwards. Her head instantly hit against a step, her legs flying upwards as excruciating pain exploded in the back of her head on impact. Turning without her volition and falling, her forehead hit against a baluster. Her feet flew up again. Screaming all the way to the foot of the staircase, she spun like a wobbling wheel segment. On the bottom landing, she lay still, remotely aware she was bleeding through the mouth, nose and a cut across her forehead. Then she lost consciousness.

Chapter 34

Cigarette smoke filled Father Hendrik van Vuuren's nostrils. He thought he was dreaming, but when his nostrils tinged on the verge of sneezing, he opened his eyes and stared into a miasma of smoke hanging in his bedroom.

The room was dimly lit. Something was amiss, undeniably. He remembered turning all the lights in the rectory off before going to bed. The reading lamp on an *escritoire* in a far corner of the room was on, but a figure sat between him and the light, its face shaded.

The priest's bowels growled and his stomach rumbled. He strained to see, his breathing becoming rapid, his eyes almost popping. Then the priest, in short-sleeved pyjamas, sat up abruptly, startled, blinking several times, a remote thought trying to convince him he was in the middle of an angelic visitation. The priest was in short-sleeved pyjamas.

The figure, a man, sat cross-legged and smoking in a chair facing the bed. The light behind the intruder illuminated at an angle the priest's Holy Bible open in the man's lap, and a silencer-fitted pistol resting on the book. Leather gloves, a tanned black jacket and a pair of tight trousers, covered his hands.

No, the intruder wasn't an angel, he reasoned. The thought had precipitated from wishful thinking. No instance from Genesis to Revelations had God sent a smoking angel to man, at that one looking like a member of the Harley-Davidson Hells' Angels. And he, Father Van Vuuren, was a fallible man unworthy of angelic visitation. He was a priest by profession not by calling.

The man spoke first. *"If the goodman of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would've watched, and not suffered his house to be broken through."* His recital was calm, like a fellow priest pronouncing a benediction. *"The Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not."*

It bothered Father Van Vuuren that the man wasn't masked, which meant he had come to kill him. On looking at him closely as

his eyes accustomed to the light, he saw that the man might be Latin American or Spanish.

The priest decided to confound him, for starters, and then instill the fear of God in him. He would bid for a chance to escape. “Moagi Makgunda sent you.”

“Oh. How do you know, Father?”

“Lately he was saying things to irk me.”

“What did the premier say to you?”

“He said he wanted to join the Russian Orthodox Church. He intended to make a pilgrimage to St Sergius in Zagorsk.”

“How’d that annoy a man of God, Father?”

“I’m a shepherd. My job is to keep sheep in the fold.”

“Why would you equate irksome words with murder?”

“Moagi killed his sister-in-law. He’s the only devil in my parish.”

“Why would Hon. Makgunda, a wealthy man, want to kill a priest... a man of God?”

“I’m glad you asked. As an assassin I don’t think he’d tell you why he’d want someone dead.” He raised his hands in the air to show the man he was unarmed. Slowly he removed the blankets and linen from his body and stepped on a Persian rug on the floor. “How did you get in?”

“How do you commit all the Eucharist prayers to your memory? I’m a professional.”

“What’d you like a priest to do for you?”

“Put your hands down. This is a courteous talk, Father.”

Father Van Vuuren lowered his hands. “I can see you came to kill me. But I’m not perturbed.” He pointed at the Bible in the man’s lap. “It’s recorded that the disciples met with violent death at the hands of nonbelievers. I’m a man of God, why should I be an exception?” He saw a small rectangular, lidded reed basket beside the man’s chair.

“I take it you’re prepared for a send-off to Heaven.”

“Stephen saw the sign. Frankly, I don’t see it; not as yet. Give me a couple of moments. When I see the sign you can shoot me through the head, but you won’t take my life. I’ll give up the ghost.”

“Is the sign in my interest?”

“I’m doing you a favour. If you killed me now I would hover over you. My spirit would turn you into a miser until you followed me to the grave. I *must* wait for the sign.”

“I like challenges. How do we kill time, Father? Do we play chess... dominoes? How can two gentlemen alone in a bedroom kill time?” He thought for a moment. “Do we kiss and fondle?”

“I must get into my vestments and pray. You’ll accord me the honour.”

“Yes, Father Van Vuuren. I understand rituals. I’m a picador back home in Spain. I hoped to be a matador someday and live like a celebrity. I looked forward to charming all the women in Madrid. Something stood in my way. I charm cobras and mambas now and kill people for a living.”

“Fate can be cruel at times, my son. Only by converting do we escape fate.”

“I don’t know what it is with fate, Father. Those who want to become pilots and engineers become schoolteachers. Those who want to become governors and presidents become barmen.”

The fact that the man was casual and his weapon rested on the Holy Bible discreetly frightened the priest. But he would keep his fear concealed and continue to buy time. “Mrs Makgunda—may her soul rest in eternal peace, visited me on the evening she was killed. I’m the last person she spoke to. The premier thinks she disclosed things to me.”

“I knocked her on the tarmac. I burnt the car along the Hennops River. My sins are scarlet. Do I deserve ablution?”

Father Van Vuuren shuddered at the additional confirmation he was determined to kill him. “Don’t be used by a devil. The Lord warned me against Moagi in a dream. You’ll pull the trigger, but you won’t kill me; I’m a sacred human being.”

“I reckon Jesus forget to say that to the Romans.”

“It is written: *Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man.*”

The man puffed smoke and grinned. “Don’t mistake me for a convert. Are you desperate for an additional tithe-giver, Father Van Vuuren?”

“What’d you’ve done had I continued to sleep?”

“I would’ve asked my friend to wake you up.” He pointed at the basket beside his chair.

“What’s in the basket?”

“Why don’t you open it, Father?”

“No. It’s *your* basket and *your* friend inside. Open it yourself.”

The man picked the pistol and aimed it at him. The cigarette was now a stub between his lips. Despite the glow, he turned it over into his mouth and began to chew it. The priest knew what the killer was doing. He didn’t want to leave objects with his genetic material behind. The man swallowed. His eyes on the priest, he leaned sideward and lifted the basket’s lid.

At first Father Van Vuuren thought a rag with shades of brown and grey lay in the basket. Then he saw that it was a full-grown puff adder. The snake was motionless, its head slightly poised to strike.

The man replaced the lid, set the Bible on the floor, stood up and began to pace. “Adders inject large amounts of cytotoxic venom into their victims. The poison destroys body cells and causes gangrene, paralysis and heart failure. Many people have lost their limbs to adders. If it bites you in the chest or neck, I wonder if you’ll be able to give up the ghost.”

“Men of God always die on their own volition.”

“How far is the sign now?” He stood by a wall switch and snapped it quickly. Light flooded the bedroom. Not even once did the man, a total stranger, lax his vigilance. Faint dragon tattoos marred his cheeks and forehead. The man strikingly resembled Antonio Banderas.

The priest realised he was getting nowhere. “Let’s talk. What can I give you?”

“You want to give me valerian and caviar? You take me for an Abyssinian cat? Is that how you plead for your life, Father?”

“You’re human. You desire money, the reason you were hired.”

“I’m Spanish; I don’t switch masters. Besides, you can’t give me anything; you’re an avowed poor man. If you’d riches I might’ve settled for them.”

“I’m not a poor man.”

“You took the vow of poverty, which was your undoing; otherwise twice an offer of the premier’s payment would’ve saved your life.”

“There’s money in my office.”

“I won’t take tithes. I don’t want to invite misfortune in my life.”

“The tithes are in the bank. The money in my office is personal.”

“How much is it?”

“I didn’t count the money, but it’s a handsome figure.”

“Let’s go to your office. I’ll walk behind you.”

“The keys are in the drawer.” He pointed at the *escritoire*, hoping the assassin would turn, and he, Father Van Vuuren, in a flash, would grab the chair and bludgeon his head.

“You need the keys or you risk opening doors with your teeth.” He kept his eyes on him, a predator focussed on prey. “Take the keys and the basket. Your movements shall be slow. Let’s get going.”

Father Van Vuuren stood up and shuffled to the desk. The man stood aside to let him pass and followed him closely, pressing the pistol against the back of the priest’s ear. The silencer was cold against his skin. At the desk, he pulled open its only drawer and took out a bunch of keys. The intruder steered him back to the basket he had by-passed.

Father Van Vuuren picked the basket with his free hand and walked towards the door, which was ajar. The light from the bedroom lit a short hallway. He wanted to walk tall, to mask his fear, but walked gingerly despite himself. This was no game; his life was at stake, and the walk might be his last.

“Father,” the Spaniard said behind him, “didn’t you forget to do something for me?”

Father Van Vuuren stopped, but the man prodded him between the shoulder blades with the pistol. He resumed walking. “What did I forget to do for you, my child?”

“You offered me neither a loaf of bread nor water. Is it not written: *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares?*”

“That’s Hebrews.” Though he found it a sarcastic joke, he walked on saying: “Further down it says: *The Lord is my helper, and I’ll not fear what man shall do unto me.*”

For the first time he wished he had rapport with God. He wished he had walked in the straight and narrow with Him, fasting and genuinely taking care of widows and orphans in his parish, and ironically taken advantage of the billionaire in that perspective; to clothe and feed the poor.

But he had been too worldly and too much of a men-pleaser and a hypocrite to advise the premier accordingly. When Lerato was killed, he was supposed to have taken his suspicion to the police. The premier could’ve been nabbed and evidence developed against him, and he, Hendrik van Vuuren, would’ve slept peacefully the rest of this night and many others to come.

The way he had lived his life before and after his ordination were the same; he had lived a life of indulgence with prostitutes. He had Indian teenage whores in Cape Town and Durban. If in the hereafter he met Bishop Charles Jolivet, the late Vicar Apostolic of the Natal Vicariate, the man born in Brittany, France and ordained priest in 1849; the man who brought the Catholic Faith to Pretoria, Father Van Vuuren would dig a burrow and bury himself. As it was, he reckoned the Vicar Apostolic was turning in his grave.

God, I’m a sinner, he prayed mutely. “I’ve sinned against Heaven and against earth, but Thou art merciful. I acknowledge my failures and ask for pardon and strength. I’ve sinned through my own fault....

Behind him, he heard a switch snap as it was turned. A florescent tube lit the passage. The outer door was closed but broken; the handle hung askance. With the hand holding the keys, he opened the door. Barefoot, he walked out of the rectory down a pergola towards the cathedral a couple of metres away.

This was the anti-climax, he reflected. He, a symbol of light in the parish, was carrying a snake, a symbol of the Devil, and walking sheepishly to his possible death. If only he could detract the man for a moment, he thought, he would spring into the bushy flowers and vanish in the darkness around the footpath, or he could hazard and

strike the assassin anyhow until the intruder's brain splattered on the ground.

Father Van Vuuren avoided the side-door that could've taken them immediately into his office. As he walked watchful for a chance to escape or attack, they went round to the façade. Light from two outdoor lamps hanging over the mouth of the double archway atrium lit the main doors and the font. He set down the basket, selected a key and unlocked the door to his right. The assassin stood closely by him, the silencer pressed against the back of his neck.

"This place is inspiring," the assassin said in exaggerated breathlessness. "I feel as if I'm at the *Catedral de la Almudena* in Madrid."

"See it in its proper light, not as a manmade building. The Ark of God is inside... but invisible."

"You *were* doing sterling work, Father Van Vuuren. I assure you, you shall be crowned in Heaven shortly. It must feel glorious to be honoured alongside St Paul."

Father Van Vuuren picked the basket, stepped into the cathedral and turned the lights on. The assassin hurriedly closed the doors behind them. The pews seemed to know and watch him in pity.

Who'll succeed me as priest if I am killed? How'll my parishioners remember me? Oh, Hennie, what do you care about who succeeds you or says what after you're gone? But he couldn't dislodge the questions from his mind.

The distance from the twin archway doors to the one in a passage whose mouth was in the western transept, which was the inner door to his office, appeared shorter than usual. In the passage was the closet holding drama attire, barbed spears, swords and crucifixes; stage props for the enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. Indeed the closet was loaded with arsenal to put down a mob, but it would be futile to stop at the closet now with the assassin keeping a wary eye on him. He hoped the money in his office would distract the murderer; he seemed an excitable man.

At the door to his office, he set down the basket again and selected another key, repeating in exactitude the ritual he began at the main doors. When he pushed open the door, stepped inside the

office and turned the light on, Father Van Vuuren reeled backwards in fear, only to be stopped by the silencer now prodding the small of his back. A noose dangled from a chandelier above his swivel chair behind the desk. A window with a broken pane and folded burglar bars was ajar. The pane's shards were on the ledge and on the floor.

"Get inside, Father. Your son hates a disobedient father."

The priest nervously stepped inside and went round his desk, all whose drawers were open. Some effects that were in them littered the floor behind the desk. A filling cabinet had been forced open. Its contents were on the floor.

Father Van Vuuren placed the basket on his desk and shrugged bafflement. He turned to face the assassin, the noose between them. The man was holding out a handful of crisp, hundred-dollar banknotes. Father Van Vuuren suspected it was his.

"Did you bring me here for this? I did an uncouth thing, Father. I rummaged through your desk. I was following instructions." The gun trained at the priest's chest, the man pocketed the money in his hip, breast and back pockets. "What do we do next? This game can't go on and on." He cocked the pistol. "Kneel down."

Father Van Vuuren raised his hands above his head. "No. I must pray."

"Kneel down and pray. I hope you won't ask for a last supper."

"Allow me to die in my vestments. There're in a closet in the passage."

"But you don't have shoes on. Wouldn't it be ridiculous to be found dead in your robes but barefoot? Won't your parishioners think you were fetish?"

"The vestments are essential. They're sanctified." His eyes were on the noose.

"I tied the rope to give you an option. If you prefer the noose you'll hang yourself."

"Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree."

"Then a bullet or two it shall be. Let's go to the closet. Put your hands down and pick the basket, Father."

The priest did as commanded.

He led the Spaniard back into the passage and stopped at a closed closet. His heart throbbed rapidly from a fusion of anticipation and fear as he put down the basket. This seemed the opportunity he wanted from the time he woke up. And he had tricked the assassin; this wasn't the vestry closet. The proper one was in the vestry itself. This was the stage-prop closet, the one with the Roman weapons. If he laid his hand on a sword, and God accorded him a split-second to turn before the man fired, he would disembowel or behead the bastard in one swing.

The assassin spoke casually as Father Van Vuuren inserted the key. "I know Catholic priests have this one ambition to rise up the echelon ladder to become bishops, archbishops and cardinals."

"That's true." He swung the door open, a small gap that didn't let the man see inside, and turned on the closet's interior light. The priest stared at Roman skirts, vests, phoney breastplates, plumed helmets and other garbs hanging on rails and hooks inside. Spears, swords and shields lay in stacks on the floor. His heart pounded.

"I stand here to tell you, Father Van Vuuren, that you'll never wear a mitre and a red skullcap. No one will address you as *My Lord* or *Your Grace*. You've come to the end of your life."

"Think about the sheep you'll rob of a shepherd. Think about God's anger you'd stir against yourself, your children and their grandchildren." Father Van Vuuren noisily fumbled with a Roman tunic. Drawing it would rouse the assassin's suspicion. There was a challenge. The weapons weren't within his arm's reach. If he walked in, bent and picked a weapon, it might clatter against the others and the murderer was likely to stand at the entrance and look inside. "Would you want God's anger to haunt your people up to the tenth generation?"

It was now or never. He decided to try his luck in a subtle way. The priest dropped the tunic. It partially draped some weapons. He stepped into the closet purportedly to pick it, but he heard the assassin coming to the entrance, closing the gap. The priest saw that it was perilous to pick a sword or a spear and swing around before the man pulled the trigger.

Now only fast thinking and reflexes would save him. He suddenly reached behind him and pulled the door closed, violently banging it shut. Finding no handles or brackets inside, which he might bridge with a sword, he kept the door shut by pulling an overcoat hook in it. Through ventilation louvers, he watched the murderer.

The Spaniard grinned. "That's a desperate move," he said calmly. "Plywood panels," he said, drumming the doors with the pistol's silencer. "Should I perforate them with bullets?" He peered inside through the same louvers. Their eyes met.

Father Van Vuuren turned the light off. If the killer left the place for a few seconds, the priest would pick a spear and lance him through the louvers. Or he would go to one end of the closet, remove a false panel and vanish into a narrow maintenance passage used by plumbers and electricians.

From the passage he could ascend ladders to the roof of the cathedral or descend to dungeon-like rooms under the building; the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, designed in cognisance of the security concerns of members of the Missionary Order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, had many secret chambers. The assassin wouldn't find him, if only he could distract him.

The Spaniard, without exerting himself forcefully, tried in vain to pull open the door, gave up and aimed the pistol at it. The barrel was level with the priest's chest. The priest side-stepped out of the line of fire.

"I'll pray in the privacy of the closet. I need a minute or two. That's all I ask."

"You aren't a rat, Father. You'll pray among angels at the altar."

"Angels are everywhere. Grant me my last request, I beg you."

"Why build an altar if angels are everywhere? Come out or you invite my wrath."

"I don't want to see your wrath, my child. All I want is a minute or two."

A hand still on the handle, the killer bent and vanished from the priest's view for a few seconds. When he straightened, he was holding the puff adder by the neck. The snake was about half a metre

long and stout. Baring its fangs from the grip and the discomfort of dangling, it wriggled. The fangs frightened the priest.

“Alright, you win, Father Van Vuuren. You’ve a minute though I don’t know what you’re up to in there.” He let go the handle, turned and faced the opposite wall.

Father Van Vuuren took it God had smiled at him despite his unworthiness. The intruder was in a perfect position for lancing through the back of his neck. If he opened the back panel and fled to the roof or the cellars, all his life he would be the Spaniard’s quarry until the assassin killed him or the police caught the Banderas lookalike. Yet there were chances the man might burst in and shoot him before he got away. He resolved to kill the brute.

Turning the light on would invite his tormentor to peer into the closet. Slanted light filtering in through the louvers created a dim illumination inside. He left the door, bent and groped for a spear among the weapons on the floor. The weapons clanked and he froze momentarily. His hands felt a shaft. With his right hand he drew a long, barbed spear.

The priest was turning and straightening when the door opened and shut immediately. From the floor, he heard a hissing sound near his feet. He knew the killer had cast the agitated adder into the closet. Father Van Vuuren stepped back, scanning the floor for the snake to pierce it with the spear.

Darkness camouflaged the reptile. On the spur of the moment, the snake leapt on his right forearm, sinking its fangs into his flesh and wrapping itself around his arm. The pain was searing. His hand unclenched without his volition. The spear fell to the floor.

Father Hendrik van Vuuren held the snake with his left hand and screamed, trying to pluck the serpent off his arm. The adder pulsated in his hand, the fangs locked in his forearm. In the confinement of the closet, the scream deafened him.

The door flung open, but the assassin wasn’t in sight.

He fell silent; the little he knew about venomous snakes coming to the fore. Panic would aid the venom to race to his diaphragm and heart, and kill him. The adder-burdened arm first, he walked into the passage to appeal for mercy. It surprised him that already he was

drenched in sweat. The Spaniard stood behind the door, his pistol poised. The weapon coughed once.

Hauled backwards, he felt as if a sledgehammer hit him on the forehead, shattering his skull. It became Father Hendrik van Vuuren's last perception.

Chapter 35

Moagi Makgunda was restless, but he vehemently resisted the urge to pace. They had offered him a chair, but he had declined it. Standing beside Dr Kingsley Housman, a surgeon with receding silvery hair, his arms and brow were folded. The surgeon sat before a console scrutinising three-dimensional X-ray pictures appearing before him. When he pressed buttons on a keypad, the images changed, zoomed or rotated.

Moagi understood he had been favoured to wait upon Dr Kingsley Housman, a female nurse and a radiologist as the trio conducted their work in the scanning room at Eagle's Nest Clinic, an elite private hospital between Silverton and the National Botanic Gardens. Like the staff, he was in a white dustcoat, a mandatory vestment for whoever entered the room when X-ray machines were operative. Except Katherine who was inside a large X-ray machine that looked like a section of a reposing rocket, he was the only indigenous African in the room. A two-tiered trolley holding bandages, forceps, ointments among other things, was parked near the machine.

The nurse and the radiologist, in surgical gloves, stood by the giant machine, the former scribbling on a clipboard and the latter peering into it through an eyepiece in its wall. Consoles and computers lined the walls. The hum of the machine was the sole sound in the room.

"The results aren't as bad as I feared," the surgeon said, his eyes on the changing pictures. "The concussions weren't very severe."

"I thank God." Moagi bent to look at the pictures, but all he saw were two craniums revolving side by side on the monitor.

"She might suffer from mild to acute amnesia for some time. The occurrence of memory loss in coma patients is very high. We can't completely rule out other associative complications like dementia."

"Do you see injuries in her brain, surgeon?" Moagi asked.

“At the moment I don’t see any. Not all injuries to the brain are easily detectable. Nerve damage can manifest itself as paralysis. There’re good chances she may suffer from insomnia. We’ll see when she comes around.”

A beep and a flicker of green light by the X-ray machine stirred the radiologist to look at the surgeon. Dr Housman nodded at him. The radiologist and the nurse turned several handles on a hatchet on the machine, and swung it open to reveal Katherine’s inert feet as she lay on a narrow bed in a tubular cavity. Blue light lit the circular chamber. The radiologist punched a button on the machine. The bed slowly wheeled out on thin rails.

Moagi watched with exaggerated fear as the machine gradually ejected her, feet first. A white, thick foil canvas covered her from the shins to her neck, and protective pads were on her eyes. Her head was completely shaven. A four-stitch wound marred her brow. Her left temple, the one visible to him, was bruised. She was motionless and alien.

“Is she under an anaesthetic, Dr Housman?”

“She’s in a coma, Hon. Makgunda. The ambulance brought her in comatose state. We injected her with painkillers.”

The nurse removed the pads on Katherine’s face and pulled the trolley closer to Katherine’s head. Her eyes were closed.

“When do you think she’ll come out of this coma?”

The surgeon made a sly smile and shook his head. “She may slip out of it today, or next week. Or it can take her several months.”

“What’s the worst case scenario, Dr Housman?”

“In prolonged comatose cases, usually after experiencing somatic death—”

“What’s somatic death, Dr Housman?”

“I’m sorry. That’s brain death. Undisputable signs of death in a person are somatic or cardiac death. Cardiac death is when the heart ceases or dies. Now, in cases when either of the two has occurred, we know that death has set in, but we can’t certify it or remove a patient from life support. Usually relatives apply to the Supreme Court or a special parliamentary committee for permission to remove the patient from a life support unit.”

“I hope it’ll not come to that, Dr Housman.”

“It’s our hope as well, sir, but some things are inevitable. You’ll forgive me for citing an unsettling extremity.”

“You don’t have to apologise, surgeon. I’m realistic.”

“We’ll monitor her closely. If her condition deteriorates we may fly her to Sweden or Canada. We’ve sister hospitals with better facilities in those countries.”

“Her life is in your hands, Dr Housman. She must live.”

The nurse inspected the stitched wound on Katherine’s brow and cleaned it with a ball of cotton and an ointment. She daubed it with a gel and began winding a bandage around her head.

Moagi watched quietly, aggrieved. But a tremor played inside him. She had tumbled from the upper landing at Eurydice’s bedroom. Her screams woke him and Eurydice. They found the door to the bedroom, a door they had closed, open. Katherine lay bleeding and unconscious at the foot of a staircase.

He wished she would wake up either forgetful of what she might’ve seen on the night she fell or she died comatose. If she died, his reputation would be guaranteed and his world would continue to flourish. Amnesia would possibly drift away someday, and she would tell the world what she saw.

Dr Housman left his chair and came to look down at Katherine as the nurse bandaged her. “All her other signs... temperature, BP, heartbeat... are on the normal side. We keep our fingers crossed for her mental state. It’s a waiting game now, Hon. Makgunda.”

“She can’t be in better hands, Dr Housman.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “I must hurry to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. My priest, Father Van Vuuren, was found murdered this morning.” He spoke like a man beyond consolation.

Everyone looked at him shaken.

“It was a tragic night,” he continued pitifully. “My wife injured herself. Not only that. My priest, a compassionate man by all means, was shot dead in a robbery. He died barefoot in his pyjamas.”

One after the other, the staff expressed their condolences. Dr Kingsley Housman remarked quietly that the Police had to double

their efforts to curb crime in South Africa. The premier nodded civilly and took his leave.

Chapter 36

Heidi Gaynor, the uniformed sergeant and two of Moagi's bodyguards in dark suits and shades waited for him in the foyer of the X-ray and radiology department. The security details were on their feet while Heidi lounged in a sofa, two leather-bound dossiers and the billionaire's diary resting in her lap. A couple of people were also seated in the foyer, some bruising magazines, others lost in thought.

When Moagi walked into the foyer, Heidi stood up and stared at him anxiously, clutching the dossiers and the diary against her bosom.

"How's she, sir?"

"Not too bad," he said without breaking pace. "She's stable but in a coma. Thank you, Heidi."

Heidi had to walk briskly beside him to keep abreast. A bodyguard ran to him and whispered in his ear. "A throng of paparazzi is waiting for you in the main foyer. Some are by the cars."

The premier stopped and shook his head. "How do we evade them?"

"We'll use a back door. I've instructed the chauffeurs to drive to the back of the hospital."

"Good. But won't they follow the cars?"

"It's a restricted area, sir. Please, follow me." The bodyguard led the entourage to a side door in the foyer. They walked down a series of passages until they emerged at the back of the hospital. Two metallic blue Mercedes Benz CLS-Class sedans with tinted windows awaited them.

Apart from a forklift offloading large oxygen cylinders from an articulated BOC truck, and the two cars, no other vehicles were in this delivery section of the property. The sergeant opened a rear door for Moagi Makgunda and saluted. Heidi and he climbed into the backseat of the first car. As the sergeant went round the car to take the front passenger seat, the two details dashed to the car behind.

The cars drove to a manned sectional security gate, went round the building and past the hospital's main reception.

Moagi caught a glimpse of a restless mob in the foyer. From the cumbersome cameras on the shoulders of some, it was clear the scrum was journalistic. It must've been the cars they recognised because suddenly the mob poured from the building, descended some low steps and ran after the sedans.

Moagi saw them via the internal rear-view mirror. The journalists were running. Running and shouting and gesturing for the cars to stop. Speed-restrictive humps stranding the tarred road every few metres prevented the cars from racing away. The politician cursed under his breath. The mob caught up with the cars at the main gate boom.

Most of the reporters assumed he was in the trailing vehicle. They surrounded it and began knocking on the windows. Only a handful rushed to the leading car.

In a glass-panelled guardroom, a uniformed security guard lackadaisically picked a clipboard, inspected it and walked to the first car. Moagi speculated the journalists had bribed the guard to delay his passage, and wished the same idea had occurred to him. He would've enticed the guard ahead of the paparazzi.

But now that they had stopped, it would be uncouth and unforgivable for a senior civil servant of his calibre, and a public figure for that matter, to deny the journalists an opportunity to interview him.

"They'll have two minutes of my time," he said to the chauffeur.

The driver nodded and respectfully touched the tip of his cap.

Moagi wound down his window electronically. As the handful of journalists who had rushed to the leading car peered inside the vehicle and recognised him, photographers clamoured by the window. When the group around the trailing car realised their mistake, they rushed to join their fellows. Scuffles ensued.

Moagi made sure he wore a relaxed face as cameras rolled and flashed. The plainclothes bodyguards ejected from the car behind and came to flank the premier's window. The mob spontaneously

screamed questions at him, vying for attention until order asserted itself and the questions came one at a time.

“Hon. Makgunda, is it true your wife is battling for her life in this hospital?”

“That’s not true, ma’am. Her condition is stable,” he said guardedly.

“What happened to your wife?” Another female reporter asked.

“There was an accident. My wife walked in her sleep and fell down a staircase.”

“There’s a rumour that you battered your wife,” the second journalist added with haste. “Did you fight your wife, sir?”

“I love Katherine. I can’t imagine myself fighting her for whatever reason. The rumour is ridiculous and malicious. I love Katherine terribly.”

“Is your wife a sleepwalker?” The question erupted from a man, a familiar SABC crime reporter.

Moagi demurred. “Everything has a first-time. She walked in her sleep and injured herself. Thank you very much. That was all the time I had.” He closed the window. “Drive,” he instructed the chauffeur.

The driver, who had signed the guard’s clipboard while the journalists questioned his master, sped the car out of the hospital premises.

Chapter 37

The afternoon was sweltering hot. Roasting draughts blew from the west.

César Sergio Miguel sat by the poolside at his rented Sunnyside house. He was in a swimming trunk, his body a billboard of tattoos. His chest stood out like deformed breasts. If he lost the knack for assassinating, he knew he could easily find work as a bouncer in hotels and nightclubs.

A large lamb leg, sausages and slices of beef and pork ribs lay on a charcoal roaster near the pool. Bottles of mustard, mint and cranberry jelly, and shakers of rough sea salt, black pepper and garlic were arranged around a veiled bowl of roasted potatoes on a serving table nearby. An Indian and a Brazilian female, both about twenty years old, frolicked in the pool.

The women were the closest he found on the market that resembled Spanish beauties. In flowery bikinis and laying on ski-like floaters, they swarm and splashed water at each other and paddled using their hands. He hardly looked at them; his eyes were on the money in seventy-eight stacks before him. Each stack had two thousand dollars.

The money and his elbows were on a trellis garden table as were three cocktails. One hundred and fifty-six thousand US dollars in one night! Business in South Africa was brisk and profitable. The payment for his latest job was yet to come into his hands. The money before him came from Father Hendrik van Vuuren's office the previous night.

Hon. Moagi Makgunda was a generous man, especially after a smart job like the one at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. Often, the premier trebled the payments if a job satisfied him. Satisfaction meant the police finding no evidence at the crime scene that pointed at the murderer or at him, the reason he delayed in paying. Between the murder and the time he paid, he would be sniffing.

But what use was all this money when César felt like an exile? A Spaniard living far from home, even if he had everything including a massage parlour and supermodels in his house, was never contented.

Of late he had made enough money to indulge. Young women were falling at his feet in Pretoria's bars and restaurants. His tongue was sore from vodka and spirits. His backbone ached from the erotic frenzy of the nights. In his heart, Madrid and her nightclubs beckoned. He was nostalgic for an appearance in *Bar Pasarela* and looking up the skirts of the table dancers in the *Oz*, Europe's largest gentlemen's club. He missed Madrid's brunettes and blondes, and their vivacious swagger.

In the outskirts of Madrid, he would establish a bullfighting arena and run it professionally. He was tired of charming prostitutes and snakes. He was tired of killing. The sight of blood and dead bodies now soured his eyes. There was a time to pick the hatchet and a time to bury it. His last victim, the priest, soiled his pyjama pants.

It was time César returned as a boss to the life of his dreams. His spirit throbbed for the day fellow Spaniards would doff their hats at his advent, and reputable picadors and matadors would beg him on their knees to enlist them. If the urge to kill embalmed him in his home country, he would expend it by killing bulls in the arena.

But his savings were still meagre compared to the life he wanted to lead in Spain. It wouldn't do his self-esteem any good to return home and live on a shoestring budget after spending years abroad. In a city of braggadocios, he would be an object of pity and ridicule among his peers. Many Spaniards who sojourned to the UK, America or Australia returned rich. He wouldn't be an exception in that perspective.

The Indian woman climbed out of the pool, dried herself with a towel and sauntered to him, decadently adjusting the bikini with her fingers. Her figure was ethereal and seemed chiselled. But it held no mystery for him anymore.

"You're a pretty girl. I wonder why you're a prostitute. It's painful."

"I'm a call-girl," she corrected him lamely, a dash of girlish charm on her face.

“It’s the same thing, Indianola.” It wasn’t her name, but one he gave her out of his detest of her trade name, Sweet-pie. The Indian name she gave him was a tongue-twister that sounded false. The Brazilian, he renamed Sao Paulo, instead of Monroe, for the same reasons. He had asked them to call him Damián; Spanish for one who subdued and destroyed.

Indianola’s eyes were on the money. He noticed she was on the verge of drooling. She picked a cocktail, sipped, set it back on the table and went behind him. He felt her hands on his shoulders and neck. She massaged the region like a Thai expert. “What must I do to make you marry me, Damián?”

He giggled. “You’re young and pretty. Men look for youthfulness in their women.”

Indianola sighed and said: “Resources give women support while they raise children. A foolish woman who marries a poor man lives to admire wealthy men.”

“You’re sharp-eyed.”

“Thank you, Damián. Does it mean you’ll marry me?”

Though her voice was jovial it tinged with a seriousness that made him turn and look up at her. “If you dropped this shitty call-girl business I’d take you to Spain. Wouldn’t you want to wed in a cathedral?”

“Are you proposing to me, Damián?”

“I don’t know, but it isn’t a crime to start thinking along those lines.”

She pointed at the Brazilian in the pool. “She stinks like a clogged sewer. I hate her.”

The Brazilian noticed they were talking about her, left the pool and ambled to the roaster. “Are you talking about me, Sweet-pie?” she asked, turning a piece of steak with a poker. Water dripped from her body.

“We’re talking about the future, Monroe. We’re talking about a wedding in a cathedral.”

“Whose wedding, if I may ask?”

“Damián and I, of course. I can hear wedding bells in my ears.”

The Brazilian laughed sneeringly. "Townsmen don't marry bitches, my dear. Find yourself a Limpopo potato farmer."

"You twenty-rand whore!" the Indian exploded. "Who're you calling a bitch?"

César stood up. "Stop it, girls!"

The women sized each other like fighter-cocks.

He began gathering the money. "Forget about the b-word. I'll leave you two for a while. I've snakes to feed." He drained his cocktail and left for the house, the money in his hands.

The house was white and English and a pale shadow of its former self. Rockeries and many flowerbeds lay fallow. Plinths held glazed but broken terracotta flowerpots. Only the hibiscus grew wildly and in abundance everywhere in the yard, the only plant that had withstood neglect.

The flowerbeds weren't without flowers, but they held dead masses of geraniums and lollipops. If he wasn't careful with his cigarette stubs, he might set the property on fire starting from the gardens. Caution and the gardens taught him to swallow the stubs of his cigarettes.

A solid sandstone base propped the house such that the main entrance was reachable by converging, craggy stairs. He walked up one of the stairs. Of Madrid, his old Spanish Flamenco flames and the new life he would lead back home, he thought. The two call-girls weren't of the remotest concern to him.

At the threshold, he stopped and looked back to see if the fire he had ignited would erupt. The girls had closed the gap between them and were mutely breathing into each other's nose. César smiled; he hated it when prostitutes made easy money out of him. For his money, he sweated and dived with death. An assassin's job was very perilous; no one was more dangerous than an intended victim facing death. Death row wardens knew it better.

He entered the house. From the lounge to the bedroom, all the furniture was mediocre. He bought it second-hand at auctions and pawn shops. In every room, including the kitchen, but excluding his bedroom, lay crates on the floor in which he bred rats. Nothing matched.

He was an assassin and needed only basic things in case he had to run. In the business, he was an enemy of the police and those who hired him. His principals were selfish men and women whom he guessed knew that an assassin had to be eliminated at the end of the day.

Empty beer bottles, the women's nightclub clothing, including under garments, were strewn on the floor. He threw the money on the bed, sighed and drew a free-standing ladder under the bed. He set it in the centre of the room and ascended its rungs. Displacing a trapdoor in the ceiling, he groped and descended with a portable cassette the size of a walkman recorder.

Noises of a feminine scuffle and shrilly cries of pain reached his ears. Glad the fire had erupted; he went to a window and looked outside. The Indian and Brazilian woman were fighting fiercely, clawing, head-butting and punching each other in the belly. Both were soiled, bruised and bleeding.

Clutching each other's throats, their legs entangled, they fell and dangerously rolled like mating snakes towards the smouldering charcoal roaster. Then they changed direction, rolled towards the pool and plunged in it, their screams dying forthwith. César smiled contentedly and left the window. He sat in a chair, his back to the window, and pressed the playback button on the recorder.

The sound of the splash of urine into a urinal bowel played for some seconds. His voice was the first to fill the room. Moagi Makgunda's followed:

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

I fired the warning shot.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

How did you do it?

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

I broke into her house through a bathroom window. The snakes scared her insane.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

A policeman told me he didn't see any snakes or a noose. Are you out to swindle me?

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

I removed everything when she ran out of the house.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

Why did you remove them?

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

The police work with evidence, sir.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

How can I trust you?

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

Find out from the woman or her neighbours.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

I'd kindle suspicion. You think the message got through?

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

She screamed like a timid girl locked alive in a mortuary.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

(After a brief silence) *As agreed.* (Another silence) *If she doesn't contact me with an apology I'll ask you to—*

César remembered Moagi making the cutthroat gesture. The Spaniard's voice came on the recorder:

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

That would be fifty thousand rand or six thousand US dollars.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

I'll double the amount if the job is done to my satisfaction. If you need anything, let me know.

CÉSAR MIGUEL'S VOICE

I enjoy doing business with you, Hon. Makgunda.

MOAGI MAKGUNDA'S VOICE

Don't mention my name! You know the rules—

It was then that a drunk had walked into the toilet in the Rotherham Motel.

The tape was one of his dubbed arsenals. Last night he had recorded every word Father Hendrik van Vuuren spoke. The priest's words were criminally usable; they threatened to mar the billionaire's reputation. He, César Sergio Miguel, would be rich. A pompous life was in the offing for him in Madrid. César turned the recorder off and put it under the chair. He returned to the window, plotting the finer details now.

The fight was still on. The bottom half of Indianola's body, who was lying on her belly, was on tiles on the edge of the pool. Sao Paulo stood in the pool forcing the Indian's head underwater, suffocating her. The Brazilian's face was now a ferocious mask with rage. The water around them rippled and bubbled. César heard gurgling sounds. Indianola struggled in vain to free herself from her rival, but her movements were diminishing.

The brawl fascinated him. The Indian's movements became lethargic to the point of death. Then she became motionless. The Brazilian let go of her when César was about to shout at them to stop. But Indianola sprang back into life, going for the Brazilian's throat and turning the tables.

Clutching her throat, she dragged Sao Paulo out of the water and kicked her below the navel. The Brazilian doubled and held her belly, keeling. The Indian grabbed Sao Paulo's hair and jumped into the pool. In a reversal of positions, the Brazilian was soon on her belly on the pool's edge, imbibing the pool water, her toes scratching the poolside tiles, her fundament disgracefully raised and bobbing.

César carefully considered how he would furnish Moagi Makgunda with copies of the two recordings, and the words he would say to the premier. He would demand two things: foremost six million euro and, secondly, the money flown to Madrid in the politician's Boeing 747 jet. If the billionaire refused to budge, he would first threaten and then go on to kill his three daughters with sniper fire as they came from school or shopped with their mother.

Chapter 38

From a world of claustrophobic whirlwinds and roaring tempests, Katherine rose with eerie buoyancy until she began drifting among serene, purplish clouds. In the world below, the tumultuous turmoil swished, mingled, roared and hissed like a sea of beheaded gargantuan dragons. She knew that as long as she was in the sky and far above the commotion below, she couldn't be safer.

In the dark mayhem, she had escaped death, but not before a masked devil lashed at her head with a sword, almost fatally injuring her. Her forehead hurt from the assault as did the back of her head. But something irked her—her daughters, all of them; Eula, Eunice and Eurydice, were running helter-skelter naked and in dread. Their nudity didn't pique them, but the dangerous environment.

When she rose into the air, her daughters were bumping into each other and falling, colliding with the masked devil and falling again, and fleeing in confused circles such that their tormentor wasn't bothered by their attempts to escape from him. It appeared there were invisible cords leashing them to posts in the heaving ground. The scenario was like a substandard opera.

The clouds were coy and warm, but her mind swarm. She looked up to see what lay above the clouds. Was there yet another sky above the sky? She strained to look up.

Katherine's eyes pried open. She was lying on a hospital bed. Tubes and electric wires linked her to machines and gadgets semi-surrounding the bed. Her head hurt and she was weak. Careful not to jerk the intravenous tubes attached to her arm, she felt her head. It was bandaged around the temples leaving a tonsure-like egg-plain crown.

Just then a door opened. Moagi Makgunda walked in carrying a banquet of flowers. He dropped them and rushed to her bedside on seeing that her eyes were open.

"What happened?" She asked him, her voice panicky.

“Thank God you’re back!” He exclaimed, clasping her right hand in his.

“What happened? What I’m doing here?”

“You walked in your sleep two days ago.”

She looked at him perplexed. “I’ve never walked in my sleep all my life.”

“Believe me, sweetheart. You sleepwalked.”

“How did I get hurt?”

“You tumbled down a staircase. I heard you screaming as you fell. By the time I got to the foot of the staircase you were bleeding and unconscious. You don’t remember anything?”

“How bad are my wounds?”

“There’re four stitches on you brow and a few minor head bruises.”

She shut her eyes, thinking, shuddered and opened them. “Where were you when I fell?”

“It’s my fault. I was in bed sleeping, honey. I didn’t hear you leave the bed.” He paused and sighed in exasperation. “I might’ve restrained you at least. You need to collect yourself.”

She stared at the ceiling. A gavotte of images flashed in her mind in recollection. Her face creased. “I had a bad dream,” she began thoughtfully.

“Tell me about it.”

“I dreamt of Rasputin... Gregory Rasputin, would you believe it? He chased me in the house.” She paused and sighed. “I remember waking up and looking for you,” she said thoughtfully. “The time was 02:20 hrs. You weren’t in bed with me at that hour, were you, Moagi?”

“Take it easy, Katy. What did you do when you thought you woke up?”

“I was weak and drowsy. I went into our bathroom. You weren’t inside, but water was running in a sink. I remember knocking the porcelain cat on the shelf. It shattered on the tiles. I left the bedroom and began looking for you in the girls’ bedrooms. I broke many vases and wall-hangings.” She stared at him for confirmation.

His response was long in coming as if an obstruction was in his throat; for some time his lips moved, but no words formed. "The passage was a mess. You walked like a blind goat."

"That means I wasn't dreaming. It doesn't make my life more bearable. I wish I could take my life."

"What're you talking about, Katy? You aren't suicidal for God's sake."

"I saw you, Moagi," she said in an acidic voice, her eyes searching inside his.

He avoided eye contact by looking at her brow. "Where was I? What was I doing?"

"*You* tell me, Moagi. I hate to pronounce it. Where were you between twenty past two and half-past two that morning? Tell me."

"Where was I? Tell me, Katy. Is this some puzzle?"

"I couldn't believe it."

"What couldn't you believe?"

"You aren't looking into my eyes. Look into my eyes. That's better." She shook her head mildly. "I saw you with Eurydice." Shame and condemnation burdened her voice. "You lay naked in each others' arms on her bed."

His countenance twisted in disbelief, and then he chuckled, a mock laugh that attempted to rubbish her statements. "You did *not* see me in her room."

"You can't deny a fact, Moagi. I saw you." Tears dammed on her eyelids and streamed down her temples.

"You *thought* you saw me, Katherine. How could I've been in Eurydice's bed when I was lying beside you in our bed?"

"You held a soiled handkerchief."

He let go her hand and straightened up. "The things you dream of! I can't even imagine myself in a compromising position with my daughter. What's wrong with your imagination?"

"Eurydice and you in that state threatened to wipe out my senses. But I was confused and scared. I reckoned it was Rasputin in bed with her. I thought he was masquerading as you."

"That clears the mist. Your thoughts were illusionary. You were sleepwalking."

“I might’ve been a half-wit at the time, but I saw you, Moagi. You were in bed with Eurydice. I’m convinced.” She sobbed increasingly.

He laughed and stood akimbo. “Eurydice, my daughter... and me in bed? That’s a serious allegation. You’ll get psycho counselling as soon as you leave this hospital.”

“No, I won’t see any psychologist. I saw you. At first I thought I was dreaming. But when I fell, the pain was real. I’ve injuries.” She circumspectly raised her right hand and touched her bandaged head again.

“You sustained head bruises and a gush across your brow.”

“No one gets injured while sleepwalking. It’s an unwritten rule. What were you doing with your daughter?”

Dr Kingsley Housman, followed by a female nurse, suddenly walked into the room.

Chapter 39

The tunnel was dank and very narrow. It smelled of sewage. Crouched beside a homemade paraffin lamp, Aluwani, shirtless and sweating profusely, burrowed with the pick at the end of the tunnel. They had cut half of the tool's wooden handle off to allow for swinging in the confinement.

Regis Makgunda sat on old, folded fifty-kilogramme hessian and polypropylene empty bags behind the digger. Originally the bags contained Vietnamese rice, bread flour and Pretoria Portland cement. Also shirtless and soiled, Regis sat on the bags under the light of another lamp. He was blowing and admiring the Luger and its three bullets. Agnes Lamola's photograph lay upturned between his feet.

Both men had thawed to the pungent smell in the boring. When they started, both were afraid they would bore into a leaking sewage pipe, whose water dampened the walls of the burrow, and feared drowning underground.

Aluwani dug expertly and incessantly. He had a tendency to inspect curious rock fragments he encountered as if they were prospecting for gold. Regis believed that indeed the man worked in the illegal mines of Johannesburg and he was once an Aid Agency for prostitutes like he had claimed.

As he laboured, grunting with effort and frequently wiping grit from his eyes with the back of his hands, Aluwani cursed his ancestors, God and the people who introduced money into the world. "You condemned me to damn hard labour, nigger," he said angrily. "I wonder if our brothers worked as hard in the damn sugar plantations of America."

Regis ignored him.

"Slave master, did you hear me?"

Regis wished his colleague would stop talking; his bad breath rendered the acrid air fouler. From habit, Regis cleaned his teeth with sticks and ashes though it did nothing to the discoloration that had

set in. He had never seen Aluwani washing his mouth. All his mate ever did with his mouth was gulp vodka and curse.

When rubble and soil accumulated between Aluwani's feet, he crawled past Regis with his pick. The latter put the Luger down, drew a polypropylene bag and crawled to the end of the tunnel where his mate was working. With his hands, he scooped the rubble into the sack.

"You love this bitch, hey?"

Regis looked over his shoulder and saw Aluwani crouched where he was sitting a while ago, Agnes' photograph in his hands. "Don't talk shit about her. Or I'll break your neck." He resumed filling the sack until it was nearly full, and began tying it.

"Shithead, how do I know you won't kill me after the robbery?"

"That's movie stuff. We're buddies, Alu. We've suffered together. If you died today I'd wash your body and bury you as decently as possible. There won't be a pauper's burial for you."

"*You* washing my damn body... the gonorrhoea and everything?"

"Wouldn't you do the same for me?"

"We're rascals, Reggie. We're of no benefit to ourselves or South Africa."

"Aluwani, you'd let convicts bury me?"

"I don't know. Life has taught me to be unkind. I think with my rectum."

Regis dragged the filled bag towards Aluwani.

Chapter 40

The mentally unhinging image of Moagi and Eurydice naked in each other's arms lingered in Katherine's mind. It stood in her view like smog. Her forehead hurt.

Questions without answers boggled her. Why had she dreamt of Gregory Rasputin? How had a historical character crept into her dreams? Moagi had denied vehemently any wrongdoing, except that he blamed himself for failing to wake up when she left the bed. Did it mean she was wrong?

But she didn't require his corroboration that the incest was a fact. He had testified that she broke vases and hangings in the house. But why was she so groggy and floppy on waking up? Had she risen deranged, or in a fugue state, and wandered in the mansion hallucinating?

She was alone, in hospital clothes and in a bed. Scores of get-well-soon cards and flowers plagued the room's cabinets and tables. The cards poured from Randlord Mansion staff members, fellow parishioners, friends and relatives, and her husband's political lieutenants.

Dr Kingsley Housman walked into the room. A surgical mask hung forlornly below his chin and a stethoscope lolled on his chest. He greeted her and began examining her brow.

"Is it too late for the hospital to do an analysis of my urine and stools?" she suddenly asked the doctor.

"What do you want the hospital to pursue, Mrs Makgunda?"

"Some things aren't adding up, Dr Housman."

"Aren't you supposed to be celebrating you came back to life?" He fingered her temples and the sides of her neck.

"On the night, I struggled to keep my eyes open and to walk. I want to know what might've caused it."

"That isn't surgical at all." The doctor listened to her heartbeat through the stethoscope. "Only a forensic pathologist can assist you in that province."

“I think I’ll need the services of one.”

“But there isn’t much he can do if our lab guys discarded the samples they collected from you.”

“You took my samples?”

“It’s a routine admission procedure. I assume we’ve a philtre of your blood and samples of your stool and urine.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Being human and susceptible to omissions, the lab guys may’ve overlooked the sampling aspect. I’ve seen it happen.”

“How can I find out if my samples were collected?”

“I can find out for you if you insist, Mrs Makgunda.”

“I insist, Dr Housman.” She sighed. “Dr Housman, how can one tell if one sleepwalked during a particular night?”

“That’s psychological.” He placed the stethoscope around his shoulders, drew a pen torch from a breast pocket and began peering into her right eye. “Psychologists have techniques to that effect. I’m a surgeon, basically.”

“Do you know any reputable psychologist in Pretoria or Johannesburg?”

The doctor moved to her left eye. “Dr Herbert O’Donovan. He’s at the corner of Paul Kruger and Proes St. Eighth floor, Oosterbroek Building. He’ll do a remarkable job for you.” The doctor put away the torch and studied her bedside documents. “I’m satisfied I must discharge you soon, Mrs Makgunda.”

“But not without my admission samples.”

“Of course, if someone didn’t forget to draw them.”

She blinked several times to offset the torch’s residual glare in her eyes. “Is there a forensic expert you can refer me?”

“There’s Dr Lefoka,” Dr Housman said instantly.

“Where do I find him?”

“It’s a *she*, Mrs Makgunda. Dr Nancy Lefoka is an analytical chemist, pathologist and the head of a post mortem department. You’ll find her at the Government Morgue.”

“I don’t know where the morgue is?”

“It’s behind Tshwane Hospital.”

“But Dr Nancy Lefoka is a bit of a screwball.”

“Don’t forensic pathologists deal with corpses only?”

“Not all the time. They do chemical and anatomical reconstructions. Dr Lefoka has extensive analytical experience.”

“Why do you describe her as a screwball?”

“She still uses primitive methods to open bodies. She works like a butcher man.”

“Can you write me a note or something like a referral to take to her?”

“I’ll be obliged, Mrs Makgunda. If the pathologist can’t help you, at least she’ll suggest some advice.”

“I don’t want my husband to know a thing about my enquiries.”

His eyes widened. “Are you suspecting foul play?”

“Not really. But there’re gaps I want filled and things I want demystified.”

Chapter 41

Regis and Aluwani lay on a patch of lawn among flowers. They were on their backs, side by side watching the stars, exhausted but radiant with expectation. Their plans were on course.

Regis was looking at his life in retrospect and telling Aluwani about his ex-girlfriend, Agnes Lamola. He told him about the afternoon Agnes and he visited his uncle for introductions; the reception and the promises of a Jaguar XKR-S or the latest Lexus, and a sponsored honeymoon on a nuclear-powered yacht from the Caspian Sea via Gibraltar all the way to Cape Town.

“You and your stupid girlfriend sat in your uncle’s damn house and listened to that trash?”

“I believed him. The man has enough money to do anything.”

“But crap is crap, scamp.”

He told Aluwani about the impromptu celebration, and how he woke up several hours later lying in a bathtub, blood-splattered and clutching Agnes Lamola panties.

“That’s a damn Agatha Christie mystery. If she were alive you’d sell her the story. You would’ve been farting rich. You wouldn’t be planning a damn bank robbery.”

“Recently I stalked Agee to her lodgings, I think for the fourth or fifth time. I entered her shack.”

“Where was her godforsaken husband? You told me she was married.”

“The cripple was out drinking.” He added that the man, an alcoholic, had gone drinking at a *shebeen*, a private house turned into an illegal beer outlet. The *shebeen* was in their neighbourhood. “Agee became hysterical. She screamed and attracted her neighbours. They came with knobkerries, crankshafts, crowbars... all sorts of things.”

“They hit you with all that?”

“They looked at me and thought I was a madman. They let me go. Agnes was too shaken to say anything.”

“They were damn right; you look like a nut.”

“You too, Alu.”

“I look like a coalminer. I know it.”

“Days later I bumped into her here in town. I’ve the good fortune of bumping into her once in a while, but the bad fortune of being at the receiving end of her spittle.”

“She spits at you like a damn snake?”

“All her demons seethe when she sees me.”

“Damn! Why do you bother?”

“Something happened at the mansion. She can’t tell me and she can’t face it in her head.”

“How does that damn affect you? Does it stand between us and Binomial?”

“There’s a prophesied role I must play to save our family.”

“Outside, you’re a tramp, but there’s a real nut inside you. You’re talking about stupid prophecies in this day?”

“The events at my uncle’s place turned me into a pauper. I know he’s a bad man, but I’ve no evidence to give me the guts to act.”

“Just damn act. Confront the bastard and kill him.”

“That’s how the Jews killed an innocent man.”

“Are you damn preaching to me, pauper? Nothing on you is enviable. God turned His back on you before you were born.”

“I’m Catholic and proud of it. St Christopher and Archangel Michael, the patron saints for paratroopers, firemen and US marines, will stand by me in the bank.”

Aluwani giggled. “You believe in goddamn angels and demons? If we’re going to be shot dead in that bank, I pray they drop you first. I’ll laugh at you before they kill me. Or I can surrender and go to jail.”

“That’s an evil prayer, Aluwani. Retract your words.”

“That cannot save you if you’re meant to die in the bank and I’m meant to go to jail.”

“We’ll make money—period.”

“We’re mongrel dogs, Reggie. Mention every saint you want, but you can’t enter Heaven.”

Regis sighed angrily and looked away.

“Are you chickening now just because I said words?”

“I’m no turn-back, Alu.”

“We need smart casual or they won’t let us into the bank.”

“That’s not a problem, coalminer.”

“You’ve the cash to buy a damn Armani or Roberto Verino suit?”

“If we’re too gentlemanly it would raise suspicion, Alu. We’ll steal ordinary clothes from washing lines in the neighbourhood.”

“You said we’d make a hovel. Where do we get the material?”

“Junk is plenty-plus in garbage bins. If we can’t find it we’ll piece together small plastic sheets into something like a quilt. But we must make sure no one sees us. We don’t want it traced to us.”

Contemplative silence followed.

“Suppose we walk out with ten million rand or US dollars, how do we count the dough? None of us should take more than they deserve.”

“There won’t be time to count it. The police will be everywhere looking for us. We just split it.”

“I’m no stooge, Regis. I’ll be the first to pick my half.”

“I’ve no problems with that.”

“After we rob the bank, shithead, we split and disappear?” Aluwani asked.

“We hide our shares and stick in this park for some days.”

“In these damn rags? Millionaires in sackcloth! You can’t be serious, jerk!”

“Yes, in the damn rags. We don’t want to be suspects.”

“What do we eat?”

“The same shit, Alu.”

“No one really knows us in this park, scallywag. The tramps here are nut-heads that have long forgotten their names. Whether we’re here or not the next day, no one will notice.”

Chapter 42

The consultative chambers at Dr Herbert O'Donovan's practice were pristine and soundproof. The northern windows overlooked the magnificent Magaliesberg, the range of mountains. The pollutant noises on the city's streets and roads below weren't heard in the chambers. If she hadn't driven herself to the address, that busy, noisy, intersection between Paul Kruger and Proes St, but had found herself in the chambers, she wouldn't have believed she was in the heart of Pretoria.

Katherine Makgunda sat in an armchair facing the psychologist in a similar one across a small coffee table. A gauzed adhesive bandage was on her brow. A cascading wig of hundred-percent human hair covered her shaved head. Its loose ends brushed her shoulders.

A studio cassette recorder was on the table, as were the doctor's clipboard holding note-written papers in doctoral calligraphy. A clock on the wall revealed it was a few minutes after midday. But she was exhausted; she had been with the doctor for the past hour and a half. Her body screamed for replenishment of energy and rest, yet she couldn't bear to return to Randlord Mansion, especially now when the object of her mission was at hand.

She was in a hugging two-piece, exclusive white costume. The attire boldly pronounced her wide hips and tapering legs screaming her descent from Hottentots. With an elephant skin Gucci handbag in her lap and a genuine gold necklace and imposing rings ornamented with Sri Lankan sapphires on her fingers, jewels many people would've passed as imitations from their attraction, nobody at face value could've guessed her mind was in turmoil.

The psychologist before her, Dr Herbert O'Donovan, a tall, lean man of about sixty-two in a navy-blue suit, was the senior consultant and proprietor of the practice. His lips were thin, his hair ashen and sparse. A retreating chin lent him a cunning, fox-like appearance. The doctor leaned forward and pressed the playback button on the recorder:

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

(Soothing) *You're now in a deep hypnotic trance. You'll follow my instructions until I snap my fingers and ask you to wake up. Your environment is safe and nothing can harm you. Do you understand?*

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Yes, Dr O'Donovan.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is your full name?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Katherine Makgunda.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

I'm regressing you, Katherine, to the recent night in which you had strange experiences. I'm taking you back to those moments in time. Where are you now? What are you doing?

Katherine shifted her weight in the chair. Her face was tense. She lifted her eyes from the recorder and looked at the psychologist. Dr O'Donovan crossed his legs and held his chin pensively. His eyes seemed to bore into her.

On the table, the tape continued to roll:

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Panicky) *I'm in our mansion.*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Could you name the mansion please?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Randlord Mansion in Wonderboom.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What are you doing?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Breathless) *There's a man in the house.*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is he doing? Do you know him?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

He's chasing me. He's white.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What does he want from you?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

He's ripped my clothes off. I'm in my underwear. He... he wants to rape me... It's clear he wants to rape me. Somebody help me!

Katherine sighed as she relived the moment. She shut her eyes firmly. Dr O'Donovan leaned forward and squeezed her forearm reassuringly. He straightened, leaning back in his chair. His voice rose from the recorder:

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is your relationship with this man?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I'm not related to him in any way. He's white. I saw him in a movie. Rasputin—Gregory Rasputin is his name.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is your business with this man?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

None whatsoever. He is a Russian born in the late 1800s. I've no business with him whatsoever.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Why then has he picked on you, Katherine?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I told you he wants to rape me. Oh! My God... here he comes again.
(Screams in gasps and pants for a long time)

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Tell me what you're doing.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I... I... I'm running away from him! He is too close! He has a sword! I'm scared.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Do not be afraid, Katherine. I told you your environment is safe.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I'm down in my panties and a bra.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

You told me that, Katherine. Who else is in the house? Where's your husband?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Fearfully) It's only me and this man in the house. I don't know where my husband is. I don't know where the children are.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What's your husband's name?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Moagi Makgunda. You don't know him? You don't know the premier of Gauteng Province?

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What are your children's names?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

The firstborn is Eurydice, the second is Eunice and the lastborn is Eula.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

How old is Eurydice?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Eighteen.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

How old is Eula?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Eleven.

Dr O'Donovan pressed the 'pause' button on the recorder. "I asked you about the children to see if you were rooted in your faculties and to check the period you were recalling. I also wanted to give you a break from reliving the ugly moments. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No, Dr O'Donovan. Thank you. You're very considerate."

"Can we continue, Katherine?"

She nodded.

He released the 'pause' button:

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Where are you now?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Shrilly) *I... I'm under him. (Constrained) He is pressing me against the floor.*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is he saying?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

He is mute. I'm scared.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

You can't be hurt because you are recalling a dream.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I broke free once again.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

I want to draw your attention to your last moments with him. I'm fast-forwarding your recollection to your last moments with Gregory Rasputin. Where are you now?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

In our bedroom at the Randlord.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What do you mean by our bedroom?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

Moagi and I use this bedroom. It's our bedroom.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Where is Rasputin?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

He has cornered me (Cries and screams)

Sweat beads stood on Katherine's forehead and the tip of her nose. The dream dawned on her again in a disturbingly picturesque manner. From the handbag in her lap she drew sheets of *Kleen* tissue paper and wiped her forehead and neck. She shifted her weight again and sat still, listening intently.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Is Gregory Rasputin still mute?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

No. He is speaking.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is he saying?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

He is asking: Praskovia, why do you flee your husband?

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Is he talking to you?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

It's only he and me in the bedroom.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Answer him, Katherine.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I'm not Praskovia. You aren't my husband.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is he saying?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Laughs in a masculine fashion and parrots a male voice) *My dear wife, Praskovia Fedorovna Dubrovina, have you lost your mind?*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Answer him.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I've told you I'm not your wife. Leave me alone!

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is he saying now?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Masculine) *It is I, your husband—Father Gregory Rasputin. Are you forgetting you've a husband, Gregory Yefimovich Rasputin?*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is your response?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I'm Katherine. My husband is Moagi— (Masculine) *Don't waste your breath, my good wife. Why must we always make love after a struggle?*
(Feminine) *Go away! Leave me alone or you'll be tried for this!*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What is he saying?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Masculine) *Is there a law in Russia that forbids a married couple to be intimate? Did I not marry you before a priest? Call our children, Praskovia. Ask them who you are or what am I to you.*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Do you know these children, Katherine?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

No, Dr O'Donovan. This man is a lunatic. He says the children are Dmitri, Matryona and Varvara. (Panting sounds) Oh! Jesus. He's coming after me. He says he is a holy man of God—a priest not a rapist.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

What are you doing now, Katherine?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Frightened) *I'm in a corner! He is pulling out his organ. Oh! My God!*
It's a puff adder (Her shrilly scream follows)

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Where are you now, Katherine?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I'm in bed.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Are you awake or you are still dreaming?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I'm awake though I'm tired and dozy. My husband isn't in bed with me. I must look for him.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Look for your husband, Katherine, if you must. Have you found him?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Shaky) *Yes, Dr O'Donovan. There he is. I can't believe this.*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Where's he and what's he doing? (Silence) *Can you tell me where he is and what he is doing?* (Silence) *Katherine, (Commands) where is your husband and what is he doing?*

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Faltering) *He is on Eurydice's bed. Eurydice is with him. They are in each other's arms and naked. He is holding a crumpled handkerchief in his right hand. It's soiled. Both are fast asleep.*

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Tell me the name of the man you say is your husband.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I've already told you, Dr O'Donovan. Moagi Makgunda, the premier of Gauteng.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

One final question, Katherine; did you know Hon. Moagi Makgunda's whereabouts when you left your bedroom?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

No, Dr O'Donovan. He was not in bed with me. He was not in the bathroom either. I left our bedroom to look for him.

"There we are," Dr Herbert O'Donovan said, turning the recorder off. "The rest you know. You then screamed; the loudest of all the screams on this tape. I didn't want you to go through it again."

An uneasy silence settled in the chamber.

"What's the interpretation, doctor?" She sat up and squared her shoulders.

"Many things can be drawn and analysed from this recording. My main objective at this stage was to make sure you listened to the recording and vouch for the voice therein as yours. I suppose you do."

"That's my voice on the tape, Dr O'Donovan."

"I'm required to study the recording. This afternoon I'll use a graphic sound machine to look at the pattern of your voice before and after you left the bed."

"How'd that help my enquiry?"

"When we're asleep certain voice elements will go to sleep as well. When awake, they also come alive. These variations are slight and imperceptible to the human ear. Electrical voice assessment works like EEG. It's oscilloscopic. The machine will make a graphical printout of the state of your sleep or wakefulness before and after you left the bed."

"Let me see if I understand you, doctor. If the pattern shows no variation before and after I left the bed, it would mean I sleepwalked, right?"

“Precisely, Mrs Makgunda. If there’re two patterns their demarcation should be at the time you left the bed. The second pattern should be consistent with wakefulness.”

“Is such an analysis conclusive?”

He nodded. “Such a blueprint would mean you saw what you saw. I hope to see you tomorrow. Same slot.”

“I’ll be here, Dr O’Donovan. My husband will be in his Johannesburg office.”

They stood up and shook hands.

“You’ll brace yourself, Katherine. The findings can be devastating.”

Chapter 43

Heidi Gaynor woke up at noon very exhausted. She kept yawning and stretching her arms as she lay in bed. It wasn't typical of her to wake up at that hour whether she had gone to bed early or late. Her boss would be angry with her, she thought. But she was vaguely conscious of an abnormality on her. What was amiss?

She felt herself under the blankets, lifted them briefly and, aghast, looked at her body. She was completely naked, she realised, shuddering. How could she wake up naked when she had gone to bed in her panties and a T-shirt? Or was she making a mistake? Could she have removed her clothes when she was in a state of absentmindedness?

She sat up, propping up her knees under the blankets. Unconsciously, she massaged the middle toe of her right foot as she fruitlessly tried to reconstruct from memory the moment she removed the T-shirt and the under garment. She remembered removing the stilettos, a risqué pencil-skirt and a sleeveless top that displayed the cleavage in her bosom, pant hose suspension stockings and a brassiere, and thinking that Hon. Moagi Makgunda was a gentleman unmindful of her clothing tastes. Then she had slipped into a white T-shirt and quickly got into bed afraid her addiction to self-abuse might tempt her to pleasure herself with the accessories in her bag. She had fallen asleep almost immediately, her custom.

Heidi had no recollection of removing the T-shirt and the panties. However, she took solace from the fact that no one else could've undressed her except herself. But how could she be certain? Was the door still locked?

She left the bed for the door, but staggered and became aware of a throbbing ache in her groin. Looking back, she hadn't engaged in self-abuse the previous night. She tried the door handle. The door was locked. She was perplexed.

If she removed the clothes, where did she put them? There weren't on the chair as was the attire she had worn throughout the day yesterday. Her eyes roamed the bed and the floor; nothing. She staggered to the closet and pulled a door open. The T-shirt and the pair of panties were neatly folded and stacked aside on a shelf. She had no memory of folding and stacking them. And it was very much unlike her to fold and neatly stow away a worn inner garment.

What was happening to her? Why was she tired and wobbly? Was she becoming a dissociative? A disbelieving pearl of laughter escaped from her lips. If indeed she had undressed herself, as was likely since the door was locked and nothing proved otherwise, it frightened her that she was developing memory lapses. Was her sad and undomesticated upbringing catching up with her?

Thinking in circles, she fixed her eyes on the wall. As a victim of sexual abuse afraid of consequences, she had read snippets of material she found on early childhood trauma. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologist wrote articles in newspapers and magazines explaining two psychological manoeuvres rampart in chronically abused children. About MPD, multiple personality disorder, and out-of-body experiences or split-personality disorder, she had read.

Now what she gleaned on the subject was coming to a head within her. She feared that as a reaction to the abusive scars in her, another personality was beginning to rise within her, subdue her true self and do things which she couldn't explain when she became herself.

The second manoeuvre coming to the fore was the subtle automatic creation of an amnesia screen that protected a victim from remembering the trauma. Heidi feared she was possibly suffering from any one of the two protective manoeuvres; hence the memory lapse. But she wasn't a psychologist and, from what she read, other psychological schools of thought doubted the existence of MPD as unethical psychology for the production of blockbuster movies. At the end of two months, now that she was gainfully employed and money had begun to accrue in her purse, she would consult a clinical psychologist in Johannesburg or Pretoria for a conclusive diagnosis.

From experts, she hoped to find help or none at all. To be healed inside didn't mean she would become the person she would've developed into if the things that happened to her in her childhood hadn't occurred to her. She shunned imagining she could restore the unscarred former self dislodged from her in her formative years. The wounds and the scars were an integral part of her.

A psychiatrist or psychologist would explain things to her, but she knew that her healing would come from tolerating the loss of her innocence in her childhood, living with the loss and trying to appreciate the insurmountable compassion the abuse might've taught her. Paradoxically, she was now at Randlord Mansion as a result of the abusive milestones in her life. Heidi Gaynor was on her way to leading a normal life, or so she felt.

But suddenly she became conscious of the irritation and stiffness in the middle toe of her right foot.

Chapter 44

Twenty minutes after she left Dr Herbert O'Donovan's chambers, Katherine drove to the back of Tshwane Hospital and steered the car, a silvery Jaguar XJ, through a gate in a fence in the backyard of the institution. A signpost confirmed she wasn't lost:

DEPARTMENT OF FORENSIC SCIENCE (MEDICAL) PRETORIA GOVERNMENT MORGUE

She found a vacant slot and parked the car facing the reception of a cluster of low, elongated buildings that were the morgue. The hospital's mortuary, distinct from its detachment and prison-like raised windows and louvered refrigeration cabinets attached to it, was a couple of metres from the morgue.

She locked the car by remote control and walked to the reception, her handbag dangling from the crook of her left arm. The hypnotic session with the psychologist had drained her of strength. But she couldn't afford to rest when she had many questions pending in her head. The reception was a small crammed room with a large wooden counter behind which the receptionist, a Xhosa-looking woman in her mid-twenties sat filing her nails. The receptionist greeted her and put down a file.

"My name is Katherine. I wish to see Dr Nancy Lefoka."

"Do you've an appointment with the doctor, ma'am?" She posed the question as if the doctor was an ordinary practitioner who served the ailing public.

"No, but I've a referral letter from Surgeon Kingsley Housman."

"I wonder how that would help. Dr Lefoka isn't a very flexible person. Have you met her before?"

Katherine shook her head.

"That explains it. Without an appointment it's difficult to see her. She doesn't tolerate disturbances."

“Could you let Dr Nancy Lefoka know that Katherine Makgunda, the premier’s wife, wishes to see her?” The words hissed out of her, the outburst shaming the speaker.

The receptionist’s eyes flashed as recognition dawned on her. She picked a receiver and poked a number on a switchboard. For a long time she held the receiver against her ear without speaking. Katherine heard the switchboard dialling until it dropped the call.

The receptionist cradled the receiver and looked up at her. “She’s not picking a phone right beside her. I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“I must see her, young lady.”

“Then I’ll risk it. Please follow the main passage until you reach a perpendicular one near the middle of this building. Turn right and count four doors to your right and enter. Don’t bother to knock. She won’t answer.”

“What kind of a person is Dr Lefoka?”

“She has worked with dead people for many years,” the woman’s voice was grave. “She hardly talks to us. She’s only comfortable among corpses.”

“Is she good at her job?”

“Many specialists say she’s the best forensic pathologist Pretoria ever saw. She does consultation services for many universities and hospitals in Europe. But she has a temper. Our morgue assistants are afraid of her. Medical students shun her. She usually works alone.”

Katherine thanked her and left the reception. She followed the directions. A door from the reception took her into a well-lit long passage with many flytraps suspended from hooks in the wall. The air smelled of an industrial disinfectant. Before she reached the middle of the passage, an information placard written in red and hanging from the ceiling stopped her briefly:

WARNING:

PEOPLE OF A NERVOUS DISPOSITION

NOT ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT

-BY ORDER

She passed below the warning and turned right into another passage, nearly colliding with a stretcher bed on which a covered inert body lay. The man behind the bed continued wheeling it unapologetic of the near collision, and heedless of her. The attendant was in a blue overall, rubber gloves, a waterproof apron and gumboots. She stood aside and let him pass. His clothing was as bloody as the white linen covering the body. She followed him with her eyes until he vanished behind a bend.

The directions finally took her to a stainless steel door with a Judas window. A label on the door said: AUTOPSY CLASS ROOM A. Through the door's windowpane, she peered inside and held her bosom.

The interior of the room was square and the size of about three standard classrooms fused together. Stainless steel cabinets, the unmistakable mortuary type, lined the walls from the ceiling to the floor. The walls and the floor were tiled and white, the latter drain-grooved. Bodies covered in soiled white linen, some wrapped and secured in hessian death-cloths, were neatly lined on basin-like operating tables.

Banks of fluorescent lights and microphones hang over every table. Foot pedals, perhaps for turning recorders on and off, lay under all the tables. She counted thirteen bodies. In the middle of the room stretched a long wooden bench with microscopes, Bunsen burners, beakers and other scientific apparatus.

A short, bulky African woman visibly in her late fifties stood over an uncovered naked body of a white adult male. The woman was in an old fashioned polka-dotted blue dress with frills and laces in front. She wore elbow-length rubber gloves, an unbuttoned dustcoat, a waterproof apron and gumboots. Her hair was short and grew in matted locks. She wore no make-up. A surgical mask rested below her chin. Discounting her clothes, a casual look could pass her as a man. Blooded from the collar downwards, she was other-worldly and cleaving the body's skull with a chopper. The body jerked stiffly from her blows. The woman worked as if entranced.

Remembering that the receptionist had said it would be futile to knock, Katherine stretched her hand to turn the door handle, but

stopped short—it was smeared with dark blood. For a while, she stood in the passage, peering inside, hoping the woman would notice her or someone with gloved hands would come along and open the door. The woman remained engrossed, the chopper rising and falling, a symmetrical cleave opening in the head of the body.

A grunt behind her made her turn sharply, startled. The attendant, whose stretcher bed she nearly walked into, stood behind her, the stretcher empty. Katherine nearly suffered a heart-attack. She stepped from the door. He opened it and wheeled the stretcher inside. Katherine rushed into the room as a pneumatic mechanism behind the door shut it.

The air in the room was painstakingly foul. The temperature inside was freezing. Goose pimples invaded her skin immediately. The attendant carted the stretcher towards the shelf-lined wall.

Katherine retched and walked gingerly alongside the bench towards the woman. As she got nearer to her, she noticed an uncovered body on a table the short woman had obstructed from Katherine's view when she stood in the passage. The body was African, feminine and in an advanced state of decomposition. It looked like a collection of dead beech leaves.

On seeing her coming, the woman stopped working and looked at her in disbelief, the chopper in her hand. "Who let you in?" The woman bellowed. "What do you want?"

"I'm Katherine Makgunda. I'm sorry for the intrusion." Katherine halted about three paces from her, a precaution. Dr Housman had described the pathologist as a screwball and a butcher. If the woman she presumed was Dr Nancy Lefoka tried to attack her, the gap was enough for her to dodge and flee.

"I'm Dr Nancy Lefoka. What do you want?" Her eyes searched Katherine's face and rested on the adhesive bandage on her forehead.

Katherine glanced at the decomposing body. She retched, rushed to a sink and vomited. When she was straightening, she retched again, vomited and stayed stooped over the sink in readiness, gasping.

Dr Lefoka followed her to the sink. "What do you want?"

She wanted to open the tap and wash her hands, but realised that, like the door handle, it was blood-smeared. "I need your help. Dr

Kingsley Housman referred me to you. I've a letter in my handbag." She used her *Kleen* tissue paper to wipe her mouth and hands.

"I've no time to read love letters. And I don't want you vomiting your organs all over the show. What's the story?"

"I woke up feeling very groggy one night—"

Dr Lefoka threw her hands into the air, lifting the chopper. "Anyone can wake up groggy due to HIV and AIDS or too much sex or alcohol. What's the story?"

Katherine didn't want to show her that she was afraid, but when she looked at the chopper she stepped backwards.

"I'm Dr Lefoka and I'm asking you your story. You've my undivided attention."

Katherine had no idea where to begin. Her assumption was that the pathologist would know what to do after reading Dr Kingsley Housman's letter. But the woman had snubbed it.

"Alright, alright," the doctor said quietly, nodding to herself. She ran water in the sink, washing down the vomit and closed the tap. "Come to the table. You'll tell me your story while I work."

Katherine followed her to the body whose head she was cleaving. Dr Lefoka resumed the blows.

Beginning from the time she woke up, she summarised the events of the last-half events of the nightmarish night, but omitted seeing her husband in bed with Eurydice. She added that staff at Eagle's Nest Clinic where she was admitted obtained her samples on admission. "I suspect I was drugged," she said in conclusion. By the time she finished, the corpse's brain lay in a tray beside a hollow head. Katherine resisted an urge to flee.

"Where're the samples?"

Katherine unzipped her handbag and produced three labelled philtres of her stool, urine and blood.

Dr Lefoka took the samples, read the labels silently and placed the philtres beside the body. "This is a woman-to-woman favour."

"I'll pay you well, Dr Lefoka."

She frowned. "Money doesn't motivate me. Passion made me take this job."

Katherine didn't know what to say and didn't want to offend her.

“Lie down,” the doctor ordered her.

Katherine looked at her mystified. Where would she lie down in the morgue?

“Time is always a premium in my work. All these bodies are waiting for me.” She pointed at the lined corpses. “Take your damn clothes off and lie down!” She barked.

“Where do I lie down, Dr Lefoka?”

“Find a free table and lie down, woman.”

Katherine glanced at the attendant. He had opened a panel door and was drawing a corpse wrapped in a death-cloth.

“Don’t worry about him. In his eyes you’re a specimen. He has seen many female nudes.” She resumed working on the body. “I’ll make a pericardial opening and come to you.” She struck the sternum with the chopper. The sound of breaking bone filled the room. Blood seeped out of the body’s ribcage.

Katherine looked away, a shiver running down her spine. She placed her handbag on the bench and walked away scouting for a clean table, conflict raging in her mind. On one hand, she thought she wasn’t safe in Dr Lefoka’s hands, a woman seemingly of a maniac disposition. On the other, she betted she would do anything to fathom the unusual grogginess she experienced on the accursed night. And for her daughters she would stoop low and stop at nothing for their protection.

On finding a table that was reasonably clean and dry compared to the others, she removed her wig, shoes, the hugging white top and the matching skirt, folded them neatly and placed everything on an adjacent table. She took her time because she was in no rush to lie in a Cadaver table. Cringing when her body came in contact with the cold surface, she lay timidly on it in a brassiere, panties and jewels, and shaking pathetically. Her teeth chattered. She clasped her jaws. Across the room, the attendant loaded the body single-handedly, looked in her direction with disinterest and carted the body out of the room.

Katherine fixed her eyes appealingly on Dr Nancy Lefoka, wishing the pathologist attended her immediately so that she could

take her leave. After prying open the corpse's chest, the doctor looked at Katherine.

"How do I work on you with your underwear on?" she shouted.

Katherine removed the brassiere and panties and cast them on the next table, resolved to take a steam and a foam bath, and throw into an incinerator at Randlord all the clothes on the next table. She lay completely naked, her hands cupped over her womanhood.

Dr Nancy Lefoka crossed to her with the chopper in her arms. It dripped blood. On her way she placed the chopper in a sink. Katherine was relieved; she had feared the pathologist would cleave open her bosom.

The doctor removed her gloves and washed her hands with a chemical. Then she picked a magnifying glass from the bench, came to her and turned on a bank of overhead fluorescents above Katherine. The doctor looked down at her from the head to the toes, which was for starters.

Using the magnifying glass, Dr Lefoka began the examination from the crown of her head. It was scrupulous square-inch by square-inch work. Katherine's hairless head didn't the least raise the doctor's eyebrows; cleanly shaven feminine heads were a common sight in the streets of Pretoria. She scrutinised the scalp, moved to Katherine's ears and neck and clicked her tongue in anger at her necklace. Dr Lefoka yanked it off and threw it away without looking. Katherine quickly removed the two sapphire rings from her fingers and placed them beside her as the pathologist explored her face, every part getting equal attention.

"You're shaking. Do you've a fever?"

"It's cold, Dr Lefoka."

"That's the problem with having a gross post mortem conducted on you while you're still alive. I like dead people. They don't complain." Her tone and facial expression meant she was serious.

When Dr Lefoka reached her midsection, Katherine was humiliated when the doctor parted her legs. She took longer than usual examining her pubic region. The attendant walked in pushing the stretcher, empty again. Katherine closed her eyes. Gradually, Dr

Lefoka scanned her thighs, fingering her skin and at times pinching and holding it stretched.

On getting to the feet, she flexed the toes painfully and looked under and between them, twisting and pulling them. The doctor was impersonal. Katherine winced. The underneath of her toes seemed to rouse the pathologist's interest, yet the doctor continued to scrutinise her in total silence.

Finally Dr Lefoka gestured to her to turn over and lie on her belly. Katherine did. The examination process resumed as before, thorough and starting from the crown of her head down to her toes.

Something under her right and left toes held the pathologist's attention. What was Dr Nancy Lefoka seeing under them?

Chapter 45

Regis and Aluwani sat on a concrete bench in Burgers Park. A swarm of cuckooing pigeons doted around the bench expectant of grains or crumbs of bread from them. The two men were regardless of the birds.

They sat quietly, sharing a bottle of Smirnoff Vodka and staring across a section of the park and Andries St at the façade of the bank:

BINOMIAL BANK OF SOUTH AFRICA (ΣBBSA®)

$$(x + a)^n = \sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} x^k a^{n-k}$$

Bank with wisdom, progress and precision. Est. 2010

The words and the mathematical equation engraved themselves on Regis' mind. Vehicular and human traffic criss-crossed before him, but he was blind and deaf to it. All he saw was the bank. He felt like a legitimate major shareholder of the bank about to walk in and claim his shares over the counter.

Over the years, the summation symbol of the bank and its equation had mystified him. Now, he thought, at least the daily value of the symbolic equation would be known to them within the coming days. What was the average amount the bank held at the start of each business day? Was it thousands of dollars and euro and millions of rand?

Aluwani broke the silence. “*Scallywag* and *scalawag*, do they mean the same damn thing?”

Regis sneered. “How can I know? I’ve never been mad.”

“They’re English words, swine. I thought you were educated.”

“Do I look like a dictionary?”

“Take it easy, scallywag. I’ll study medicine after the robbery. Women love doctors.” He paused. “What’s suppuration of the urethra?”

Regis erupted. “Stop harassing me, Aluwani!”

They sat in silence for several minutes.

“If a person has AIDS, syphilis and gonorrhoea,” Aluwani began, “won’t the germs destroy each other?”

“Look at the bank and concentrate!”

“Okay! Okay!” Aluwani focussed on the bank in mock seriousness. “Our money is sitting in that damn bank. When do we pounce on it?”

“The twenty-eighth of January. Only three days to go.”

“What’s special about the twenty-eighth?”

“City Council employees get paid on that day. It’s a Monday.”

“What’ve damn Council employees got to do with our project?”

“The employees will start the day at their respective banks. I’ve been observing them. On the twenty-eighth the gardeners and janitors of this park report for work from about ten o’clock onwards.”

Aluwani frowned. “It’s like listening to a talking cross-word puzzle. When you made me dig the tunnel I thought you were normal. What’re you talking about, punk?”

“On Sunday the twenty-seventh of January, we’ll erect the hovel at night and then we work from within. The following day, which is the twenty-eighth, at half-past eight, we’ll walk into the bank as they open the doors.”

“But we haven’t tested the damn Luger. We must test the damn pistol. For two and a half years it lay under your rotting father. Maybe it doesn’t work.”

Regis gave him a reprimanding glance. “Don’t talk about my father, you swine! You make him turn in his grave.”

“He turned when we robbed him. He won’t turn again unless he has become a damn Ferris wheel.” They shared the bottle in silence for a couple of minutes. “We must test the damn weapon. We’ve to be sure of our firepower.”

“We won’t test it, Alu, forget it.”

“What’s wrong with you? Sometimes you’re so reasonable that you would’ve my damn vote if you ran for mayor. Other times you’re a good example of a dunderhead. It’s difficult for me to be proud of you. I’m a pauper, but you’re a damn pauper and an idiot at the same time. God knows I don’t mean to offend you.”

“Scold me a thousand and one times and see if we’re going to test-fire the Luger.”

“Why are you refusing? Don’t give me a thousand reasons. Just give me one damn reason, or I’m out. I can’t risk it with a pistol we aren’t sure of.” He opened his palms and showed them to Regis. “My life is in my hands. I’m a hard-worker, not a bank robber.”

“Spare that for the judge in case we’re caught. I’m tired of listening to your nonsense. Your breath is foul.”

Aluwani drained the vodka into his mouth and smashed the bottle at their feet, scaring away the pigeons. Strollers in the park looked at them in disgust. Those who were walking towards them changed direction cautiously. A young couple that was sitting near them on another bench rose and went to sit away from them on yet another bench.

“It’s too late for you to quit, Aluwani. We’re in this to the grave or until we split the loot. If you quit I’ll strangle you before Monday. The police will think you died of cirrhosis in your sleep.”

“But why can’t we test the damn pistol, scoundrel?”

“We can’t test it. We fire once; we lose one bullet out of three. We can’t rob a bank with only two bullets.”

Chapter 46

The next day, Katherine Makgunda and Dr Herbert O'Donovan sat in the same chambers. Unlike the previous day, they had exchanged positions. A forgotten mug of tea was on her side of the table. The recorder and the clipboard were on the coffee table as before. The room was stone-silent.

She was in a peach-brown twill jacket with matching pencil slacks, and as before, distinctly jewelled. The adhesive bandage was still stuck on her brow, and the wig concealed her shaven scalp. Her handbag was Gucci and elephant skin again, but of a corresponding shade to her suit.

Dr Herbert O'Donovan was mournful in a grey business suit and a black shirt.

"You dreamt of Gregory Rasputin and woke up screaming," he said matter-of-factly.

"In the first place, why did I dream of him particularly?"

"You might've dreamt of him as an insinuation into your thoughts of the impression of his character into your psyche after you watched his movie, according to your admission. But from a clinical perspective, many individuals experience nightmares out of their own mental instability and deep rooted fears."

"I've watched many unsettling characters at the cinema and in real life, but to think that I dreamt of Rasputin of all the people unsettles me."

"Some nightmares are caused by unresolved psychic conflicts arising from childhood," he continued. "There're so many culprits: physical and emotional abuse, traumatic accidents, war, the death of loved ones, fear of the unknown, you name them. I could pinpoint the source of your nightmare if you availed yourself for more sessions."

"I'm mainly concerned with what happened after I left the bed. Was I fully awake or did I walk in my sleep?" She paused, realising

that her voice was rising. She took a deep breath and continued. "Did I see my husband in bed with my daughter?"

"Katherine," he said inadequately, uncrossed his legs and drummed the fingers of his right hand on the armrest. He picked the clipboard on the table and briefly went through some notes, humming quietly. Replacing the board beside the recorder, he studied her for a while.

She thought he was looking at her piteously. "Tell me, Dr O'Donovan."

"You recalled the time on the clock as 02:20 hrs," he began. "You knocked down vases. You walked into your daughters' bedrooms. In Eula's room you saw several dolls in compromising positions."

"That's true; I recall it vividly."

"A Teddy-bear and Eula's small violin lay beside her in a compromising position. The bear lay facing up, the neck of the violin between its legs. The instrument's scroll flashed with the bear's face. When you looked around you saw Eula's dolls, about a dozen pairs, in coital positions."

"Yes, Dr O'Donovan," she sighed. "The dolls were on two reading chairs, the *escritoire*, tables, and on the carpet."

"You looked at the dolls in disbelief and thought you were dreaming."

"Yes, Dr O'Donovan."

"Then you turned the lights off and the girl woke up sweating, screaming and shivering."

"Yes, Dr O'Donovan."

"You put her back to sleep then you proceeded to the other bedrooms. You fell down a staircase and felt the pain of the injuries. On coming out of a coma, you remembered every detail without the induction of regressive hypnosis. It's clear from a psychoanalytical perspective that what you experienced after rising from the bed is recorded in your conscious mind and not in your subconscious."

"What does that mean?"

"I can safely certify that I'm ninety-nine point nine, nine percent convinced that you saw Eula and Eunice alone in their beds. And—"

he faltered and cleared his throat needlessly. "I'm sorry, Katherine." He spoke like a surgeon hesitant to announce to relations the death of a patient on his operating table. "You *saw* Mr Makgunda and Eurydice on a bed in your daughter's bedroom. I can bet my practice certificate."

In a cocoon, she digested his words. Disbelief mounted in her. He had said ninety-nine point nine, nine percent. Essentially he was saying Moagi was sexually abusing their daughter. She didn't want to imagine her husband sexually abusing Eurydice, yet she did but tried to refute it though nothing so far exonerated her husband.

"Dr O'Donovan," she said looking up and bringing tissue paper to her eyes, "how can a parent, a mother especially, tell if her daughter is being sexually abused?"

"The child exhibits significant and worrisome behavioural change."

"How does her behaviour change?"

"Cases differ. The signs and symptoms can be arbitrary. There're two major categories of abuse. There's abuse that is violent. It leaves the child withdrawn and sad-faced. Victims may develop self-hatred and engage in self mutilation. There's abuse that happens in the context of passion, which children can easily mistake as love and affection. I strongly suspect the second category is the case at hand."

"In that category, how'd one notice, Dr O'Donovan?"

"The signs and symptoms are generally the same for both categories. Sexually abused children complain of pain while urinating. They usually engage in persistent sexual play with pets, toys and friends. Some engage in excessive masturbation. Some begin to bed-wet again."

She held her head, flabbergasted.

"These victims often experience nightmares during the night. They wake up screaming and sweating. Some suffer from loss of appetite and many often experience inexplicable gagging. A child may regress to tendencies too young for a stage development they've already passed."

The doctor's words assaulted her like Greenland hail.

“Unorthodox theories point that a child, who normally sat with her knees apart, carefree from childish innocence, would close them. If she sat with them closed, she’d spread them in instinctive anticipation or because she becomes conscious of the feelings in her drawers....”

As he elaborated, she looked at her family in retrospect, and shook. The signs and symptoms were plenteous at the Randlord Mansion. She recalled the incident of the gobbler and the mare when the animals threatened Eula and Eurydice with bestiality. Eula had cried and tried to find out from her the bird’s intentions. Katherine had assumed that naturally Eurydice would approach her in private for the meaning of the mare’s action. She never did. Now she deduced that her eldest daughter had perhaps discussed it with her father in confidence. How could she have come to her when she was intimate with their father?

Lately, the two girls suffered from loss of appetite and gagged at the dinner table. On the day of the attempted bestial attacks, Moagi and she had discussed it. He attributed their behaviour to adolescence and puberty, squaring the blame on hormones. And Eurydice took long in the bathroom, which suggested a possibility of self-abuse.

The signs were just too many. Eunice, at thirteen, wasn’t above suspicion either. At the table, besides complaining of poor appetite and gagging, Eunice and Eurydice exchanged furtive glances with their father. Every night, as long as he was home, he went to check on the girls, and she let him do it in her stupidity and ignorance. He doted on the children more than a mother would. She recalled finding a St Valentines card in Eurydice’s bedroom the previous year. The girl said it was from a classmate, but remotely Katherine had thought that the hand on the card resembled her husband’s.

In recent days, Eula had begun to exhibit some behavioural change. Eula preferred Moagi’s lap to sitting alone in a sofa. In his lap, she fidgeted. The girl had retaken to playing with rag and plastic dolls in the cubby house at the back of the mansion. Indeed she was regressing to behaviours too young for her age.

Until recently, the girl used to sit recklessly with her knees apart and usually her drawers showing. Lately, she sat with her knees together, almost religiously, and took great care not to expose herself. The evidence of his debauchery had been under her nose all these years, yet she had been embalmed in trust and ignorance.

On the night of the nightmare, evidence of persistent sexual play had stood around her in Eula's room. Her cubby house dolls, items she had grown out of, lay paired in suggestive positions. It wasn't coincidental that the violin and the Teddy-bear seemed to be mating. Eula had woken up screaming and shivering and sweating. The girl had bed-wetted.

Katherine held her head. Tears freely fell on her handbag.

The doctor picked the clipboard, flipped over the topmost paper and studied a perforated computer printout. "When you narrated the pursuit, the apparatus plotted a dune-like wave. The variation occurs at the moment you left the bed. The waves and troughs become acute and forward-facing like the teeth of a hacksaw. The new pattern is maintained from that time until your final scream."

"What do I do, Dr O'Donovan?" She asked between sobs, hatred of her children and her husband swirling inside her.

"Cry, Katherine. Cry. It's healthy to cry. He's your husband and Eurydice is your child. It's up to you."

"It's up to me to do what?"

"Child abuse of that nature is a felony in South Africa. Incest is a crime. But you don't have evidence admissible in a court of law."

"Can I've him arrested on the basis of this tape and my word?"

"He can be arrested, but the monster will be acquitted."

"No judge or magistrate in their right senses would acquit him."

"Courts work with tangible evidence. Judges and magistrates want to see evidence of penetration attributable beyond doubt to the suspect. The children must be willing to testify against their father. Conviction comes after the elimination of reasonable doubt." He paused. "However, the law is a double-edged sword, Katherine. If he's arrested over this without your assistance and the courts learn that you were aware of the abuse, you'll be tried as an accomplice."

He glanced at his wristwatch. "You must gather yourself and go home to rest."

She pointed at the recorder. "I'll need a duplicate copy of the tape."

"You'll have to keep it in the strictest confidence, Katherine. Such material can motivate murder if it is discovered."

"I'll lodge the copy with my bank until I require it."

He nodded approval. "A duplicate copy will be ready tomorrow. Make sure you pick it in person."

"Something bothers me," she said suddenly. "What would cause a tom and a mare to... to desire to mount children?"

"Do you mean their offspring?"

"I mean my children, Dr O'Donovan. It happened three weeks ago. The attempted attacks were less than an hour apart."

"That's weird unless the turkey and the horse are often used in bestial acts; otherwise there's no other scientific explanation."

"The animals have never behaved strangely before."

"I'm tempted to believe so much is happening at the mansion. You need to investigate, Katherine. The grey areas are too many. You also need to find out why you were unsteady when you woke up."

"An expert is assisting me in that regard. I'll pick the answer just now on my way home. Thank you, Dr O'Donovan."

She dried her eyes again and rose, but suddenly her ears buzzed. The joints in her limbs ached. The world darkened in her eyes. She wanted to reach out to Dr O'Donovan for support, but he blended with the darkness. She staggered, her knees buckling, strength and breath deserting her. Katherine Makgunda sank to the carpeted floor.

Chapter 47

The premier's four-engine Boeing 747 jet touched down at Gateway International Airport in Pietersburg, the provincial capital of Limpopo. Being South Africa's gateway to Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Botswana, the airport was a fairly large collection of modern terminals and support buildings. Humming and hissing deafeningly, the jet taxied to a remote part of the airport away from the terminal buildings, where two Bell 412 Air Force of South Africa personnel-carrier helicopters were waiting.

Through a window, Heidi Gaynor saw the helicopters start their rotor blades. A dozen armed soldiers stood guard around the identical aircrafts. The Boeing 747 came to a halt near the helicopters. A utility short truck with flashing beacons came to attach a staircase against the side of the jet.

Within, a hostess and a bodyguard opened the door of the plane. The two led Moagi Makgunda, a small entourage, including Heidi, out of the plane, down the staircase and to the waiting helicopters. While men clutched their jackets, Heidi and the hostess had to hold down their skirts; the wind gushes from the helicopters threatened to undress them.

The jet continued to whirr as Moagi, Heidi and two bodyguards climbed into one of the helicopters. Two soldiers outside the plane slid closed its side doors. The rest of the entourage rushed to board the second helicopter. The planes lifted almost simultaneously and flew westwards in linear formation, the one carrying the premier and Heidi trailing.

Everyone was strapped to their seat. Heidi sat facing Moagi. Being her first time to board a helicopter, she was nervous and willed herself against developing flight nausea. The engines of the helicopter seemed to roar and pulse in her ribcage.

The premier might've read her fear. He looked at her with a twinkle inviting her to smile. She did; she was against frustrating his effort.

Through windows, she saw that the northernmost province lay within the great ox-bow elbow of the Limpopo River, and was a vast land of spectacular contrast. Below and in the distance, she saw bushveldt country, primeval majestic indigenous forests, stretching mountains, clusters of pole-and-mud village huts, terraced plantations, magnificent patchworks of communal farmland and the Great North Road stranding the centre of the province.

But when she looked at Moagi, the billionaire was staring at her. Though Heidi quickly looked away, she had noticed his charm, or so she thought, ready and beguiling. It surprised her; he had never shown interest in her or spoken to her beyond business and common civility. She respected him as her newfound boss and a cornerstone of her life. From the first day she saw him, she had never entertained indecent thoughts about him though they tried to invade her mind.

But now, despite herself, she passed in retrospect all the men she had slept with, from the overseer of the orphanage that housed her, Father Claude Gaynor, his nineteen-year-old son, Renee, to the rich men who patronised the Château Richelieu. Most of the men she pleased were far older and uglier than the premier. Coming to Africa didn't create her a saint or purge the world of its cynicism.

Of saints, Father Claude Gaynor's wife, Emma, had read her Psalm verses and pampered her with love and companionship, only to attack and humiliate her at the end and banish her from their double-storied house in Cubitt Town in London's Isle of Dogs. Mrs Emma Gaynor taught her a lesson at a tender age she couldn't forget; that one could love someone's child as their own, reading them the scriptures and assisting them with their homework, and yet attack and turn their back on them when they were traumatised and most vulnerable.

Appearances and actions were façades. She wasn't what Moagi thought she was, neither was he what he projected on the outside. *Vanity of vanities*, Emma had once read to her, *all is vanity*.

At the end of the day, wasn't the premier going to lure her as Renee Gaynor had when she was eleven? The business mogul's favoured treatment of her, wasn't it what the second-year motor

mechanics student had done with chocolates and sweets before going on to touch her restricted regions seemingly by mistake?

She remembered warming to Renee's advances. Within a short time he began raping her almost every night until she was fourteen, sex-obsessed and insatiable. By appearance, the Gaynors were a loving family, unlike Moagi Makgunda who was flying when his wife was recovering alone from the trauma of falling down a staircase while sleepwalking.

Suddenly the helicopters were circling a large mountainside complex flanked by two Olympian swimming pools and extensive flower gardens. It had the appearance of an aristocratic hotel. Scores of white children, darting dots from the air, ran about cheering the helicopters until the planes landed on an asphalt-paved clearing in front of the buildings. It was only when the helicopters had landed and the children surged forward that she noticed that all of them were albinos.

"Welcome to Green Haven Hospice!" Moagi Makgunda shouted above the noise of the engines, his eyes on Heidi.

"Thank you, sir!" she shouted back and laughed, assuming her voice had been too pitched.

Bodyguards issued from the helicopters. Three rushed to restrain the albinos from advancing to the planes. But the children, ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers, were too many and excited. They ran round the men and clamoured to shake the premier's hands as he set his feet on the ground. Heidi saw the reason for their excitement; their hospice was prestigious, they were in expensive clothes, all of them, none of them was sickly, and their sole benefactor had landed.

Clutching two toddlers against his hips, the children crying from the hubbub of the confusion and the noise of the aircrafts, Moagi Makgunda stooped and walked out of the radius of the rotor blades.

A cloistered matron distinct with her cream uniform and a badge, and three members of staff in sky-blue dresses, all nuns, came forward to welcome the premier and relieve him of the toddlers. Crucifixes and Maria-medallions dangled on the bosoms of the sisters. It was a moment of exuberant joy as the children and the

sisters hugged the premier, shook his hands and went on to meet Heidi whom they greeted formally.

The pilots turned the helicopters' engines off. Apart from excited voices, silence fell on the hospice. A sad moment lapsed when the sisters said their condolences over the death of their spiritual father, Father Hendrik van Vuuren.

Heidi felt honoured to be a part of the premier's philanthropic efforts. She estimated the number of albinos was between fifty and sixty. The matron and the three sisters then dismissed the children, literally dragging some from their benefactor.

The politician introduced the matron and her subordinates to Heidi before the sisters led them to a large, detached dining hall in which exotic dishes; wild oysters with Mediterranean salsa, pesto-coated calamari, roasted meats and cumin-scented and caramelised salads, awaited them.

From the air, the hospice had looked like a hotel. Heidi thought it could easily be one with its chefs and great dishes. Attended by an Indian chef and three waiters in spotlessly clean white uniforms, Moagi, Heidi and the sisters settled down to eat. The matron took the opportunity to thank the premier for his kindness and briefed him on how the children were doing.

After the meal, the matron took them on a tour of the complex. They visited the girls' and boys' dormitories, classrooms, play centres and a hundred-seat cinema, all well-equipped and Spartan. The matron and the mogul then went into the former's office for a closed-door meeting.

Heidi continued her tour of the premises under the guidance of the three nuns. The sisters told her the hospice was home to destitute albinos from all over South Africa. Showing her building foundations and incomplete structures surrounded by builders' scaffolds in one end of the complex, they informed her that the hospice was expanding to accommodate more cases from the region. They informed her it was the premier's dream to construct a university and a technical college near the hospice for the convenience of its housemates.

They were walking round one of the swimming pools when a girl came to inform them that the matron and the premier had come out of their meeting and were waiting for them in the TV lounge. The nuns took Heidi to the lounge in the main building. The room was spacious and lined conference-style with leather sofas. Moagi and the matron sat in separate sofas facing the housemates. A staff compliment of about a dozen teachers in suits stood behind the children maintaining order and silence. Females dominated the compliment.

As the three nuns went to take positions like the teachers, the matron beckoned Heidi to come to her. She gave her a handwritten notebook page with three names on it and gestured towards a vacant sofa on the far side of the mogul. Heidi sat down beside her master, wondering what the names meant and what to do with them.

"I'm happy to see all of you again," Moagi said without rising. "Your welcome was great and you look wonderful." He glanced at Heidi. "Today I'm visiting you in the company of Miss Heidi Gaynor." He gestured towards her.

She stood up and smiled.

"Miss Heidi Gaynor joins my Randlord staff as one of my PAs. From time-to-time she will visit you on my behalf for the furtherance of your welfare and happiness." He turned to her again. "Thank you, Heidi, you may sit down."

Heidi bowed slightly and resumed her seat.

"But I bear sad news, very tragic news," he went on. "Some of you found yourselves here through the benevolent efforts of Father Hendrik van Vuuren." He paused. "That priest, that good man, the very one who carried you in his heart and arms, is no more."

The children gasped appalled.

"Some of you, especially staff members, may already know that Father Hendrik van Vuuren was killed two days ago in a robbery at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Pretoria. I sent an email asking the matron not to break the news to the children. I knew that the news would devastate some of you."

Teenagers and adolescents became teary as the news sank in them.

“Father Van Vuuren will be buried in the cathedral grounds tomorrow. Three of you’ll attend the father’s funeral as a token from Green Haven Hospice.”

The audience raised their hands and some stood up as a show of interest for selection.

“Please put down your hands. I know all of you would like to attend.”

The children lowered their hands. Those that had juttet sat down.

“I’ve requested the matron, Sister Thembeke, to select three of you. She has already given me the names. I’m happy to announce that the three won’t be returning to Green Haven.”

The children were saddened and puzzled.

“They’ll be asked to pack all their belongings and take them to the helicopters.”

A fearful murmur swept across the room.

“To mark and celebrate Father Hendrik van Vuuren’s death and in recognition of the great work he did and his passion for you,” the billionaire went on, “I’m sending the three to Copenhagen in Denmark. I’m placing them on a permanent study scholarship in that country. They’ll be taught Danish for a year or two before they embark on their studies up to university level in Denmark or at Vasser or Yale in the United States, if they so choose.”

All members of staff and the children clapped their hands. Some boys whistled while the matron and some of the girls ululated. When the show of excitement subsided, Heidi observed the matron wiping tears of joy from her eyes.

“Miss Heidi’ll announce the names of the lucky ones.”

Heidi Gaynor stood up, a note already in her hands. She read the names with great difficulties: “Noluthando Skweyiya!”

An adolescent girl sprang to her feet. People clapped their hands and openly envied her. She was grave, shocked. The girl suddenly burst in tears.

“Linda Noxolo!”

A teenage girl rose from a chair. She sobbed and covered her face with her palms.

“Finally,” Heidi Gaynor said, looking about at the expectant faces. “Norman Mhlanga!”

A boy of about fifteen jumped to his feet and danced with jubilation on the spot.

Chapter 48

The air in the pathologist's office was less pungent than in the morgue proper. Sitting facing Dr Nancy Lefoka across her desk in her office overlooking AUTOPSY CLASS ROOM A, the room in which Katherine Makgunda had lain on a table the day before, she could see covered bodies in the adjacent room, and couldn't believe she had placed herself on one of the tables for examination. It sounded crazy but she had done it. Now it was over and Dr Nancy Lefoka was opening a thin file folder on the desk to give her the results of the analysis of the three samples.

Without the chopper and with her blood-spattered dustcoat hanging on a hook behind the door, the doctor was less threatening though her matted locks gave her an outlandish appearance. When she arrived about ten minutes ago and the pathologists led her from the examination room into her office, the doctor quietly took her seat behind the desk and left her standing forlornly as she rummaged through some drawers. She was in an outdated frilly dress once again. Katherine grew tired of standing and settled in a chair.

Like the morgue's reception, the office was small and cluttered. The doctor's desk held a laptop, a constellations pendulum, a miniature skeleton, tomes of medical books and brochures, all in disarray, and several sealed jars individually holding livers, kidneys and other organs suspended in a transparent solution. Steel filing cabinets and charts of the human anatomy covered the walls. A life-size artificial skeleton stood in a corner.

As the doctor selected a sheet of paper and perused it in silence, Katherine recalled her last moments in Dr Herbert O'Donovan's chambers about two hours ago when she fainted. The psychologist had dialled 911 and set about reviving her. By the time an ambulance crew rushed into the chambers with a stretcher, she was tiding herself and arranging her wig in a bathroom. In her left hand, she held a warm glass of water sprinkled with a pinch of cayenne pepper which Dr O'Donovan had prepared for her.

The crew left the chambers without her despite their insistence that she might need to be examined by a medical doctor who might detain her overnight for monitoring. Though she felt a little faint, she knew that hospital admission would work against her; her husband would investigate how, where, when and why she fainted, and possibly learn about the psychologist's findings. When the crew had gone, Dr O'Donovan attributed her collapsing to the devastation of the anomaly she witnessed on the accursed night.

"Were you in a theatre recently?" Dr Lefoka began; her eyes on an analytical report.

"No. I was only put in an X-ray machine at Eagle's Nest Clinic. I was in a coma."

"Were you still in a coma when they stitched your brow?" The pathologist pointed at her bandaged forehead.

"Yes, Dr Lefoka. I didn't feel a thing."

"Do you take sleeping drugs?"

She shook her head.

The doctor looked at her fixedly. "The lab found traces of two benzodiazepines in the blood and urine samples."

Katherine looked at her blankly. "What're benzodiazepines?"

"They're a type of sleeping drugs only available on prescription. Temazepam and loprazolam were found in the blood and urine samples. These are oral drugs in most cases."

"I've never been on sleeping tablets, Dr Lefoka."

"Traces of succinylcholine were detected in all the three samples. This drug is rather difficult to trace."

"Perhaps they injected me with the drug at the clinic."

"That's not possible. Succinylcholine, also known as suxamethonium, is strictly administered in the theatre. Medically, it is used to induce muscle relaxation. Anaesthetists and emergency doctors prefer it because of its fast onset. It is usually used for the facilitation of what is known as endotracheal intubation—the insertion of a tracheal tube into a patient."

"How did the drug enter my body?"

“Succinylcholine’s other use is in the criminal world. The drug sedates before a person can be suffocated. It makes death by suffocation seem natural. This drug is a pathologist’s worst enemy.”

“Does it mean someone wanted to suffocate me?”

“That’s very possible and one of several options. I must add that as a sedative, succinylcholine or suxamethonium is a very powerful anaesthetic. It’s a miracle you woke up before its effects waned completely. This brings us to the second option—someone really wanted you to sleep through the night.”

“I could’ve easily slept through the night, Dr Lefoka, but I think it was the intensity of the nightmare that woke me up.”

“Do you suffer from mellitus diabetes?”

“No, Dr Lefoka.”

“Do you inject yourself?”

Katherine shook her head perplexed.

“How often do you spend nights with friends or relations away from your home?”

“If I’m not shopping abroad I’m usually home with my husband. Why do you ask, Dr Lefoka?”

“Do you’ve a boyfriend or someone close to you who experiments with or uses syringes?”

“I’ve no boyfriend. I’m not close to anyone except my husband.”

“Who’d want to see you dead?”

“I’ve no enemies, Dr Lefoka, at least none that I know of.”

“If you were to die, who’d benefit from your death?”

“Nobody,” she answered with a straight face. “My husband is a rich man.”

“The examination I conducted on you yesterday revealed something that suggests someone’s criminal intent on you.”

“Tell me more, Dr Lefoka.”

“I discovered evidence that for quite some time someone has been injecting you using a syringe. The skin under your toes is slightly blue-black. There’re signs of needle pricking between and under the toes. Whoever is responsible is a cunning devil who didn’t want you to see anything.”

Katherine realised that by asking her probing questions, the doctor had exposed Moagi Makgunda, and there was no way she could exonerate him in the pathologist's eyes.

"Watch your husband. There're chances he's a player. Most marriages nowadays end in suicide, divorce or a bloodbath."

"Can I've a copy of the findings, Dr Lefoka?"

"Of course, I don't need them in my office," Dr Lefoka passed the printed sheets to her. "This isn't for me to say, but your husband may want to see you dead. What confuses me is why he keeps injecting you between the toes without suffocating you at the end."

"Tell me something, Dr Lefoka. Can these findings be used in a criminal court?"

"No. I didn't record the results of the gross post mortem. You weren't dead when I examined you. My job is to establish the cause of death. In a court of law the defence team can easily disapprove of the needle pricks and the discoloration as symptomatic of disease or something else."

"What about the traces of the drugs you mentioned?"

"The defence will want to know when the samples were drawn, who drew them and in whose custody were they placed. They'll demand proof that the containers they were put in weren't already contaminated with succinylcholine."

Katherine sighed, frustrated.

"They'll also want to know how they reached the morgue. They'll demand the name of the courier and proof of that company's expertise or lack thereof in handling samples. And I don't want my name mentioned under such circumstances. I've a reputation to protect."

Katherine folded the papers and put them in her handbag. "I appreciate the service you gave me, Dr Lefoka," she said, taking out a bundle of crisp two-hundred rand notes and holding it to her. "Please accept my token. I've no other way of thanking you."

"This was a woman-to-woman favour. Put your money away." Dr Nancy Lefoka drew her chair back and crossed to her dustcoat hanging behind the door. "The corpses are getting tired of waiting," she said, unhooking the garment and putting it on. "Good day."

For a while Katherine held the money while the doctor busied herself with the dustcoat. But taking a cue from Dr Kingsley Housman who described the forensic pathologist as an eccentric, she shoved the money back in her handbag and rose.

Chapter 49

The Rolls-Royce Phantom TB, the Gold Edition sedan, black, silver and golden, ostentatious and gleaming, Moagi Makgunda's preferred car of the week, turned into the driveway of Randlord Mansion. The main gates automatically slid open via blue-tooth interaction. A bullet-wound, light-machinegun-armed soldier in fatigues stepped outside the premises and held his rifle at the ready as he looked about while two uniformed policemen from South Africa Police Service's VVIP Protection Unit saluted in unison until the Phantom and a Mercedes sedan bearing security details passed by.

In the Rolls-Royce, Moagi sat tacit, thoughtfully drumming his fingers on a rear door armrest. The dashboard clock stated the hour as 11:20 hrs. He had started the working day as usual, bathing, breakfasting and kissing his wife and children good day before leaving for the Gauteng Provincial Government Building in Johannesburg. But his personal chief of security had called him on his cell-phone, the reason the billionaire had decided to leave his office prematurely and return to his residence to verify for himself.

The car went round the fountain- and gargoyle-graced roundabout in front of the mansion. The sergeant alighted before the car came to a halt. He opened the door for the premier as soon as the car stopped. Standing aside, he saluted as Moagi stepped out of the car and walked towards the main door. Divine Kakudji, the butler, and Heidi Gaynor stood on the threshold, the door wide open behind them.

The billionaire walked into the house, Divine and Heidi trailing him. In the lounge, he turned and declared that he wouldn't need the trainee PA until tomorrow. Heidi curtsied and left the room immediately. Divine Kakudji closed the door as soon as Heidi left.

The premier sank in a sofa and stared at the wall opposite him. The butler came to stand at his side awaiting instruction. Moagi

didn't request anything. He sat seemingly oblivious of the butler's presence.

"I know Katy isn't here," he started without looking at Divine Kakudji. "The chief of security called and told me so."

"Of late, her movements have been mysterious. She drives herself and avoids the company of bodyguards."

"The chief informed me she has been like that ever since they discharged her from the hospital."

"She's acting weird. She burnt a wig, a pair of shoes and a white costume in the incinerator."

The billionaire screwed his face thoughtfully. "I want her followed. I need a log of every person she goes to meet and the addresses she visits. I can't assign the task to the chief of security. He doesn't have my full confidence. I don't want the outside world to think I mistrust my wife."

"I've already had her followed, sir. I set Seidu Amissah on her from day one."

The premier looked at the butler and grinned. "You're God-sent, Divine. Where does she go?"

"She has been to Dr Herbert O'Donovan's chambers on the eighth floor of Oosterbroek Building."

"What's this Dr Herbert O'Donovan into?"

"He's a clinical psychologist. She has visited him twice so far. Her last visit was yesterday."

"Katy is a naughty girl. Where else has she been to?"

"From Dr O'Donovan's chambers she went to the Government Morgue at the back of Tshwane Hospital."

He shook his head slowly, mystified. "What business did she have at the morgue?"

"Seidu Amissah learnt from a receptionist that she was visiting Dr Nancy Lefoka. The doctor is a renowned forensic pathologist."

"Where else did she go?"

"She deposited an A5 khaki envelope with the Rhineland-Palatinate Oasis Bank at the corner of Prinsloo and Pretorius St. Seidu Amissah saw two armed guards leading her to the bank's safe-deposit vault in the basement."

“That’s mysterious. What do you think was in the envelope?”

“I wouldn’t know, sir. But Seidu Amissah said something small and flat was inside.”

“Where was she coming from when she went to the bank?”

“She was coming from Dr O’Donovan’s chambers.”

“The Rhineland-Palatinate Oasis Bank you said?”

“*Yessar*. The branch is at the intersection of Prinsloo and Pretorius St.”

The premier scratched his head. “Why didn’t you inform me of all these developments?”

“I was in the process of gathering every bit of information about her errands. I hoped to give you a comprehensive report shortly.”

“The bank manager, Rafael Kabelo Kumona, is a friend of mine.”

“You know the manager, sir! Wonderful.”

“He and I were in the same stream at the University of Pretoria. Both of us were committee members in the Student Council.” A smile of conquest crossed his face.

“Is Rafael a corruptible character, sir?”

“We’ll soon know what Katherine lodged.” From an inner breast pocket of his suit he took out a cell-phone, poked some buttons and placed it dialling on the low table in front of him.

“Hello,” a male voice came on the loudspeaker of the handset.

“Sorry to bother you, Mr Kumona, my dear friend. It’s Moagi Makgunda, the premier.”

“*It’s never a bother to receive a call from you, sir. How’re you, Hon. Makgunda?*”

“I’m coping. Thank you for asking. But I’m a bit in an awkward situation.”

“*How can I possibly be of assistance to you, sir?*”

“My wife prematurely deposited a khaki envelope with you yesterday. I’m stuck because I need to make use of its contents.”

“*Our retrieval procedure stipulates that Mrs Makgunda should present herself and claim the parcel. That’s how the system works. As you know, we safeguard title deeds, agreements, jewels, gold bars and documents of a sensitive nature. We adhere to strict security regulations, Hon. Makgunda, or we can be sued bankrupt by our clients. I’m sure you understand.*”

“I understand perfectly, Mr Rafael Kumona, but there’s a snag. My wife is in Malaysia as we speak, and there’s material in that envelope I must prepare for the President’s consumption. She lodged the material prematurely with you.”

“Hon. Makgunda, you’re placing me in a tight spot. I’m a mere custodian at the bank. The owners are in Germany.” The voice was silent for a moment. *“Your wife has the electronic key to her safe.”*

“My wife and I are one flesh.”

“Computers record the times and dates she opens the safe. A printout automatically sent to her at the end of the month will show that we opened her safe without her permission, and that’s dangerous for our reputation. It’s unprecedented and it has the potential to scare away our clients.”

“Your IT engineers know a smart way of opening the safe. Do me that one favour or you’re placing my job on the line. The President of South Africa is my boss.”

“If you insist, our risk manager will call Mrs Makgunda for her express approval. We’ve her contact details in our records.”

“We’d lose time unnecessarily. I’m the premier of Gauteng Province, Mr Rafael Kumona; it’s a position of trust. I certify the province’s commissioners of oath. I wouldn’t want to enter your name in the Gauteng catalogue of counterproductive people that mistrust me and the government.”

“I’m trying my best to assist you, Comrade Premier—”

“We’re talking provincial and presidential matters here, Mr Kumona,” Moagi interjected. “Must I list you among provincial enemies of the state? Perhaps you’re now a citizen of Germany by virtue of being a branch manager with the Rhineland-Palatinate Oasis Bank. I’m ready to throw you an extravagant send-off party.”

“With all due respect, you’re threatening me, Hon. Makgunda—”

“When did you develop a poor man’s mentality, Rafael? I’m trying to make you rich and you interpret that as an intimidation.”

“But, sir, when you talk about citizenship and a send-off—”

“My wife is in Singapore and there’s a tempest in that city as we speak. I can’t even raise her on the phone. I’m sending a driver with a token for you.”

The voice sighed. *“When do you return the parcel, Hon. Makgunda?”*

“By the end of business today it shall be back in the safe.”

“I’ve a few demands though.”

“State them. We’re losing time.”

“I shall need an authorising letter from you explaining the expediency. It isn’t my bank’s business to know what our clients deposit, but in this case I’ll look at the contents and record their description. The person you’ll send with the letter will sign for the parcel in our out-going register.”

“I appreciate your comradeship, Mr Kabelo Kumona. My driver will be in your office in thirty minutes.”

“Good day, Hon. Makgunda.”

“Good day, comrade.”

The connection went dead.

Moagi smiled. “I’m sending Seidu Amissah to the bank,” he said to Divine Kakudji as he pocketed the handset. “He knows the right envelope to pick.”

“Seidu is on Mrs Makgunda’s tail.”

“Order him to abort; this is more interesting. I don’t want the Ghanaian following Katy into a grave. Fetch me a writing pad.”

Chapter 50

From the morgue, Katherine drove aimlessly through the city's CBD. She didn't know where to go and how to face her husband without betraying the hatred and bitterness inside her.

As she drove, she continued to see Moagi and Eurydice in bed. Throughout their marriage, twenty years now, she had found him passionately indulgent and uxoriously tender. As he doted on their daughters she hadn't the slightest suspicion he was sexually predatory. The image of the two in bed harassed her.

Like someone in a stupor, she drove northwards along Potgieter and turned into Struben St. Four robot-controlled traffic intersections later, she turned into Van Der Walt St and drove southwards.

She was thinking. When she slipped from the coma five days ago at Eagle's Nest Clinic, she had considered suicide and let Moagi know it. But he had told her easily that she wasn't suicidal. This was before she met Dr Herbert O'Donovan and Dr Nancy Lefoka. Though what she now had in her possession, and had safely deposited with the Rhineland-Palatinate Oasis Bank, wasn't in itself admissible at law, she knew beyond doubt that her husband was evil, and if she killed herself she would've surrendered lambs to a wolf.

The findings by both the psychologist and the pathologist didn't exonerate Moagi. Both doctors warned her against her husband. Dr Lefoka even proved by subtle elimination that the culprit injecting her between and under her toes was nobody but her husband. He was an enemy within. She was nothing to him but a blinded relegation, a wife for window-dressing purposes.

He was seldom intimate with her. She had blamed it on the premiership and his ever expanding business empire. Now she clearly realised that it was impossible for him to pleasure her frequently and reasonably when he was expending himself on their daughters. For how long had he been cheating on her so painfully? Katherine had no

idea. But Dr Lefoka had said the skin under her toes had discoloured, which could mean that the flesh had deadened over the years.

Undoubtedly Eula, their youngest daughter, was a part of the conspiracy. Days before she saw Moagi and Eurydice in bed, Hicks the French poodle with merino-quality furs, had gone missing during the day. According to witnesses, Moagi and Eula were the last people who saw the dog. Maids and gardeners saw them riding out, the dog trailing them excitedly. But when they returned the priced poodle was missing.

When she tried to inquire from them where the dog was, father and daughter exchanged conspiratorial glances and speculated that he wandered into the woods. Both suspected he was snatched by an eagle or beaten by a snake. Katherine assigned men on horseback to look for the pet. For over four days, they systematically combed the woods in the property, but returned empty-handed. No matter how much she tried to coerce and coax Eula into disclosing what had happened to the dog, the little girl wouldn't look her in the eyes or change her statement. Katherine saw that her daughter was hiding something from her.

The streets were grey and gloomy. The Jaguar XJ made two more right turns. She drove up Potgieter St again. To break the monotony of seeing the same buildings, she absentmindedly made a turn and found herself driving against traffic in a one-way street. A marked police patrol vehicle coming from the opposite directions turned on its warning lights and siren, and blocked her passage. Two policemen emerged from the patrol car and approached hers cautiously, their pistols drawn. A small curious crowd gathered. The policemen ordered her out of the car.

Katherine spent the next ten minutes apologising for negligent driving and blaming it on stress and, pointing on the bandage on her brow, medical drugs. She lied that she wasn't carrying a licence and gave them a false name and address. The policemen flatly refused a bribery offer of the money Dr Lefoka turned down. One of them said she looked familiar and wondered if she wasn't an MP or a deputy minister. Katherine said she wasn't a public figure.

After verifying that she was sober after ordering her to blow into a breathalyzer, they fined her for negligent driving and driving without a valid driver's licence, and advised her to go home and rest. Katherine thanked them for not confiscating her car. She made a U-turn and steered the car towards Sunnyside and Arcadia, where traffic was sparse and one-way streets were few.

Driving slowly through the jacaranda-lined streets of the two neighbourhoods, she thought about her initial resolution earlier that she would use every nuance of energy and inkling of wisdom in her to gather incriminating evidence against Moagi. Until then, pretence would be the name of the game. She would give him love and affection and make love to him as if she was his only resort.

If at all emotions overwhelmed her, she would lock herself in a bathroom and weep softly so that Moagi and the children wouldn't hear her. She would give him nothing to fret about. Life at Randlord Mansion would unfold in an orderly serenity, but behind the curtains she would move with haste because he might deliberately, or otherwise, overdose her with succinylcholine, or impregnate the girls.

Near the corner of Mears and Esselen St, Katherine slowed down and read a signpost at a business property:

BUSHIDO SECURITY COMPANY (SA)

For security consultation, bodyguard services, undercover investigations, security monitoring & evaluation, CCTV and alarm installations, Rapid response and vehicle tracking.

MOTTO: Bushido and hari-kari, sworn ways of the warrior.

The company's logo consisted of crossed Samurai swords obstructing an abstract ninja.

She turned the car onto the premises, a large renovated three-storey house. No security guard was in sight, but there were cameras in every direction she looked. Many vehicles were on the premises; most of them marked 'Bushido Security'. After parking and locking the car, Katherine made her way to the reception. Glass-panel doors slid open at her advent and closed behind her.

Chapter 51

The air inside the security company's building was refreshingly cool. The floor was thickly carpeted and all the visitors' chairs were empty. The furniture and furnishings were oaken and bamboo respectively. The walls were indigo and decorated with sketches of ninjas and Samurai fighters. If Katherine hadn't seen the signpost outside, she would've thought she had strayed into the headquarters of a martial arts club. A young Japanese woman in a kimono sat behind the reception desk.

After warm greetings and a word with the woman, Katherine was asked to walk into a room marked 'INTERVIEW ROOM 1', one of five along a passage. The room was a small cubicle padded with acoustic panels. Two armchairs faced each other separated by a low table. Nothing else was in the room.

As soon as she sat in one of the chairs, a Japanese man in a dark business suit walked in, bowed towards her and closed the door. He carried a diary. Lean with neither a moustache nor a beard, he was boyish and on the pretty side. If he wasn't Moagi's age, then he was slightly younger. Introducing himself as Mr Ryuu Masayoshi, he took the other chair and welcomed her to Bushido Security Company. Katherine gave him her first name only. They shook hands.

"Would you like a beverage... coffee or whiskey?"

"No, thank you."

"What can we do for you, ma'am?" he asked in a reserved tone, opened a page in the diary and held a pen at the ready.

"I need to know what happens at my house."

"Are you suspecting your husband or someone of infidelity?"

"I'm suspecting something worse than that. I need tangible evidence."

"Where do you live, ma'am?"

"At the Randlord Mansion in Wonderboom. Hon. Moagi Makgunda is my husband."

The man bowed again. "I'm sorry I didn't recognise you, Mrs Makgunda. My apologies. But you look different from the pictures we see on television."

"It's the wig, I suppose, Mr Masayoshi."

"What precisely do you want Bushido to do for you, Mrs Makgunda?"

"I need an undercover investigator in my house. I wouldn't want to pre-empt anything, but I suspect something sinister and unpronounceable is going on at Randlord. I want a detailed report of what happens during the day and during the night."

Mr Masayoshi scribbled in his diary and looked up at her. "Do you want us to focus on an employee or a member of the family?"

"I want to know what everybody who lives in the mansion does. Everybody is a suspect."

"You don't need an undercover agent, Mrs Makgunda. You need hidden motion-sensor cameras installed in strategic places in your mansion. Everyone's movements will be captured 24/7."

"I want them installed in every bedroom."

Mr Masayoshi shook his head. "Ethics forbid it. We can install them in lounges, drawing rooms, porticos and passages, but never in bedrooms." He leaned back in his chair. "What about your children's privacy, Mrs Makgunda? The law doesn't allow us to make nude recordings without the written consent of the subjects under focus."

"You don't understand, Mr Masayoshi. It's imperative that I know what happens in my daughters' bedrooms. It's for their protection and well-being that I seek your services."

"If we captured them in the nude and the recordings leak, Bushido would be shut down and charged for malpractice."

"I thought you were professional and treated your findings in the strictest confidence."

"We try our level best to do that, but we aren't expert at breaking the law. Our installations record theft, pilferage and robberies in departmental stores, factories, offices, commercial banks and car parks. But when we mount cameras in bedrooms we'll surely make nude recordings. We won't be able to defend ourselves in court or before the Ethics Committee."

"You'll install cameras in my children's bedrooms," she said in a fiery commandeering voice. "Bushido'll treat the recordings with the strictest confidence. No one, and that includes my husband, should know about my concerns or the recordings."

The Japanese gaped.

"I'll grease your palms and pay double your normal rates."

He sat up and cleared his throat unnecessarily. "Confidentiality is our second nature, ma'am. You've my word."

"Your word alone isn't enough, Mr Masayoshi."

"What do you propose as the way forward, ma'am?"

"This afternoon I'll request my lawyer to compile a secrecy agreement between your company and me. My lawyer, Advocate Everson Gcingca, will drive to this place for your managing or executive director's signature. Within the hour it must be ready."

"I'm the owner and executive director of this company."

"Oh, is that so? Will you sign the agreement?"

"Yes, gladly. Due to the sensitivity of the matter, I'll personally install the cameras. When do I visit your residence?"

"My husband is hardly home during the day."

"The onus is now on you, Mrs Makgunda. Once I sign your proposed agreement I'll drive to your mansion tomorrow."

"How'll you explain yourself to the security details and the maids?"

"I'm an expert. I'll drive to your residence in a car written '*Pretoria Pest Control*' purportedly to make a preliminary inspection for pests before fumigation. You'll advise your staff and your husband to expect a fumigation inspector."

Katherine took out the bundle of two-hundred rand banknotes in her handbag, split it roughly into halves and held out one wad to him.

The Japanese shook his head. "I don't take bribes, ma'am. It would dent my self-esteem." He bowed politely.

She pooled the wads and smiled. "I'm impressed, sir," she said, returning the money into her handbag. "One more thing, Mr Masayoshi, there's a room in the basement of the mansion. It's digitally locked. Only my husband has access to it."

"What does he say is in the room?"

“He said as a high-ranking government official he was bound to have top secrets and to protect them. I trusted him, but now I’m beginning to think otherwise.”

“I’ll see what we can do.”

Mr Ryuu Masayoshi and Katherine Makgunda stood up. He led her to the cashier’s office for payment.

Chapter 52

Moagi Makgunda, Seidu Amissah and Divine Kakudji sat around the desk in the premier's residential office in the back of the mansion. The three were pensive. A cassette recorder playing on the desk was coming to an end. This was a copy the butler made immediately after Seidu Amissah fetched the original from the Rhineland-Palatinate Oasis Bank at the corner of Prinsloo and Pretorius St. As the premier had promised, he returned the original to the bank within the time he specified.

Katherine Makgunda's voice and a male, authoritative English one alternated on the recorder:

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Where's he and what's he doing? (Silence) Can you tell me where he is and what he is doing? (Silence) Katherine, (Commands) where is your husband and what is he doing?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

(Faltering) He is on Eurydice's bed. Eurydice is with him. They are in each other's arms and naked. He is holding a crumpled handkerchief in his right hand. It's soiled. Both are fast asleep.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

Tell me the name of the man you say is your husband.

KATHERINE'S VOICE

I've already told you, Dr O'Donovan. Moagi Makgunda, the premier of Gauteng.

DR O'DONOVAN'S VOICE

One final question, Katherine; did you know Hon. Moagi Makgunda's whereabouts when you left your bedroom?

KATHERINE'S VOICE

No, Dr O'Donovan. He was not in bed with me. He was not in the bathroom either. I left our bedroom to look for him.

The voices ceased. The butler turned the recorder off.

"This Dr O'Donovan knows too much," Moagi said calmly.

"There must be duplicate copies and documented records in his cabinets," Divine Kakudji noted. "Count him among your enemies."

"I'm not kind to my enemies. It's time he updated his last will and testament," the premier said gravely, cracking the knuckles of his left hand.

"What happens to this Dr Nancy Lefoka?" Seidu asked.

"The report I found in Katy's handbag talked about Benzodiazepines and succinylcholine." The premier produced a folded photocopy of a laboratory analytical report. He unfolded and placed it on the desk, next to the recorder. "*Hon. Moagi Makgunda* isn't mentioned at all. I don't think the pathologist is an immediate threat."

"But we can't be too sure," Seidu said.

"I'll send her a visitor at night a month or two after we're through with Dr Herbert O'Donovan. Her soul shall wish she had performed her own post mortem."

Chapter 53

At half-past eight in the morning of the twenty-eighth of February, Regis and Aluwani were already standing outside the Andries St branch of the Binomial Bank of South Africa. Regis had traded his cart two days earlier for two hundred rand and three bottles of Smirnoff Vodka. The amount was roughly equivalent to thirty-four US dollars.

Last night, while Regis burnt his belongings in a bonfire, except the worn-out Bible and Agnes Lamola's photograph, his colleague refused to destroy his possessions. The seeming coalminer discreetly buried his bags in the park. Aluwani and he then bathed with water from a fire hydrant in Burgers Park.

Now it was Monday—the Monday. None of them looked like a downright coalminer or a lunatic. Already they were blending well with about a dozen people waiting for the doors to open.

Through gaps in the louvers, Regis saw five tellers, men and women, taking positions behind counters. A man in a suit carted bundles of money in transparent plastic bags to their cubicles. But the trolley was small and bore rand denominations.

Regis glanced at Aluwani. His counterpart's face was beginning to glisten with sweat. The morning was warm, but not to the extent of drawing perspiration, especially on the face of someone standing in the shade of a veranda. The two had wished it would be cold on the day, to justify woollen or leather gloves. As it was, their hands were bare, but they would take caution not to touch anything in the bank.

The branch's sole security guard, a Sudanese-black giant with a barrel chest pressed against the breast of his blue shirt uniform, came to the door and unlocked it from inside. The man carried a pistol holstered around his waistline. He stood back and the clients walked in one by one, the guard smiling and greeting them. But Regis noticed that the giant's objective wasn't cordiality. He was vetting the people for signs of trouble; banks were most vulnerable at opening time.

Aluwani must have been the seventh or eighth person to enter. But in a hooded American baseball sweater, a wrinkled pair of formal trousers and battered shoes from whose tips his toes peered, he was an obvious suspect. Even a raw guard could've picked him. Regis looked the same, except for the colour of his sweater. His was black while his colleague's was white. They possibly belonged to one victim of their outdoor drying line theft in Arcadia. But decent shoes had proved hard to come by.

He was revolving with the door when he saw the guard calling Aluwani to return to him. Aluwani had passed the giant and, head cautiously bowed, was making his way to join a small queue forming in the bank. Some tellers had already started serving. Aluwani froze in mid-stride.

Things had started by going wrong. Regis' heart thumbed like a triple-hammer. He watched his mate turn and retrace his way back to the guard, his head still bowed. The giant's hand hovered near his holstered pistol.

Regis' stomach grumbled. He feared he was going to mess his trousers. This was trouble. Just like him, Aluwani was concealing a large plastic bag under his sweater and a rolled up makeshift balaclava mask on the crown of his head under the hood. Regis carried the Luger in his trousers. In the time it took Aluwani to reach the guard, the world stood still for Regis.

One thought told him to abort and continue revolving in the doorway until it ejected him, and then run before his mate revealed their intention. In that split-second, he listened to a counter thought assuring him that Aluwani hadn't committed any crime so far and appearing suspicious to a security guard wasn't criminal. South Africa was full of dubious people walking scot-free. Suspicious faces comprised the Parliament. It would be illegal and unethical for the giant to search his colleague.

The guard gestured at the first counter where a teller had just finished her preparations. The seemingly preferred treatment was a definite sign the giant wasn't seeing Aluwani in good light and wanted him served immediately under his watchful eyes and monitor him

until he left. Aluwani had neither penny nor personal ID on his person.

But the guard made the terrible error of gesturing with his right hand, moving it away from the pistol. As Aluwani changed direction in compliance, Regis stepped into the bank, coughed and threw back the hood covering his head. He quickly rolled down the mask folded like a skullcap on his head.

The cough was a signal to Aluwani. His colleague brought his hands up, threw the hood back and rolled down a balaclava mask, just as Regis had, just as they had rehearsed it. The guard's right hand was in the process of swinging back to his weapon when Regis pulled the Luger from the back of his trousers, pressed its muzzle against the neck of the uniformed giant and drew the guard's holstered pistol. The giant raised his hands and froze facing the counters.

"This is a robbery!" Regis shouted and stretched the acquired pistol to Aluwani.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a man who was revolving with the door widen his eyes, cower and let the system eject him. The man dashed away. So did a few figures by the entrance.

"Everyone get down!" Aluwani bellowed to the clients as he received the weapon and cocked it immediately, just as Regis had taught him.

The handful of people in the hall surged backwards and sprawled in surrender, petrified.

Aluwani turned to the tellers, "Behave and there won't be any damn bloodshed!" From underneath his sweater, he drew the empty plastic bag and cast it at the first teller, a coloured woman in her mid-twenties.

"US bucks and British pounds!" Regis barked.

"High denominations only!" his colleague added.

Aluwani sprang onto the counter and began perambulating between the first and the fifth counters, pointing the pistol at the tellers and at times at the people on the floor. The first teller began stuffing bundles of money into the bag. Her movements were frantic.

For a vagrant with an alcohol-reddened face, he was good, Regis thought as he commandeered the security guard to the counter, the

Luger still pressed against his neck. The giant breathed like an asthmatic and collapsed at Regis' feet before they reached the counter. The guard began frothing in the mouth.

Like his mate, Regis drew his plastic bag and threw it at the third teller, a spectacled middle-aged man. The man started filling it with money that instant. The bags passed over low glass-panel cubicle demarcations to the second and fourth tellers respectively. But the bags weren't filling quickly. Regis and Aluwani would've to commandeer a staff member to a vault. But he distrusted banks' walk-in vaults; he had heard many robbers were locked in them.

"I'm a doctor," a white man on the floor appealed, raising one hand and pointing with the other at the guard.

"*Shuttapu!*" Regis pointed his pistol at him.

The man cowed. Discounting gurgling noises and sounds escaping from the lips and bottom of the giant, the scuff and whoosh of plastic against plastic and the clatter of Aluwani's wooden-heeled shoes on the counter, the hall was tomb quiet.

A door behind the cubicles opened and a short plump man, an indigenous African of about fifty spotting a glittering S-curl hairdo and walking boastfully in a dark suit, emerged. He was looking over his shoulder and talking. From their research, Aluwani and Regis knew he was the bank manager. The money-carter appeared behind him with another load, but this time the cart bore bundles of US dollars.

"This is a damn robbery, Mr Thulani!" Aluwani shouted on the counter. He pointed his pistol alternatively at the pair. "Put every damn US dollar and British pound in the bags, and you'll goddamn live!"

The bank manager and the man raised their hands. Though the former remained calm, he stood aside and let his subordinate cart his trolley past him.

Regis realised that something was wrong. There was no traffic hum. He looked outside through the glass doors. His heart sunk. Along Andries St, a major road often bustling with activity, there was neither pedestrian nor vehicular traffic. Through the louvers, he saw that the bank's veranda was deserted. Across the street, he saw four

rifle-armed policemen taking positions among the flowers in Burgers Park, and pointing their weapons at the bank.

Chapter 54

Men and women in expensive suits, decorated police uniforms, army fatigues and Air Force ceremonial dress streamed out of a boardroom. They poured out to take a supportive stance behind the Police Minister on a podium in the press conference room in the National Police Headquarters in Pretoria.

Present were Captains of the banking sector, the Air Marshal and his deputies, the Police Commissioner General, provincial premiers and other high-ranking officials. Epaulettes and other decorations lent a stately frightening air to the occasion.

For the past two days, the police and the Air Force of South Africa had deliberated the formation and modalities of a joint-cooperation committee. An agreement had just been signed by the Police Commissioner General and the Air Marshal of South Africa. And now, as was his custom, the Police Minister took the podium to speak. Speechifying was the minister's lifeblood.

"The rate of violent crimes including bank robberies is alarming," the Minister said, looking into cameras. "On several occasions we received requests and appeals from various quarters to step up our efforts against crime. I'm pleased to say that cash-in-transit heists have gone down by about seven percent in the past year." He paused from habit, expecting applause.

No one applauded; this was a press conference.

"Street robberies went down by about ten percent, sexual crimes by four and a half percent and bank robberies by nine percent." He paused again. "While the South Africa Bank Risk Information Centre (Sabric) was pleased by the decrease in cash-in-transit crimes, the centre issued a statement that they were cautiously optimistic the continued efforts by the police to strengthen their partnership with business and other sectors in the fight against crime would yield the desired results." He paused for the third time. "Today I'm proud to announce that in pursuance of our singular and inflexible drive to

further reduce cash-in-transit heists and the incidence of bank robberies, my ministry has concluded a joint-cooperation agreement with the Air Force of this country.”

Detective Senior Inspector Tony Khumalo, head of the city’s Violent Crimes & Robberies Unit, stood on the sidelines. He was a man of action. His nickname, Bolt-Cutter, was earned. Speeches and listening to support-mongering politicians bored him. South Africa’s cash-in-transit heists and bank robberies kept him on his toes every day. His adrenalin pump had long stopped working. The joint-cooperation was his brainchild.

After witnessing robbers escape in getaway cars through the streets of Pretoria, and the police vainly giving chase, he had suggested to the Police Commissioner General the involvement of the Air Force. The Commissioner had argued that the police had helicopters. The detective inspector had counter-argued that police pilots weren’t daring enough and their air-to-surface assault was poor. Now the cooperation had come to fruition and the Minister was harvesting all the credit.

“The agreement is with effect from now,” the Minister was saying.

The inspector’s cell-phone vibrated in a pocket of his trousers. He drew it and saw a text message:

*Rbbry underway @ Andries
Binomial. 2 suspects. 4 cops
@ scene. Mo arriving.*

The message came from a detective sergeant in charge of Central Pretoria.

Det. Snr. Insp. Tony Khumalo quickly elbowed his way through a crowd of journalists in the room. He was going to the podium. The Minister and everybody would be pleased to hear that the joint-cooperation had its first job at hand.

Chapter 55

The two bags were now fully stuffed, tied and lay near the revolving door.

The tellers, the security guard and everybody, stood against the front windows, the backs of their heads pressed against the louvers. Aluwani moved on the floor of the hall, monitoring them vigilantly. Outside, marksmen trained their weapons at the bank. But the people inside were shields. Women and a few men were crying.

The crescendo of a helicopter prompted Regis to investigate. Holding the bank manager by the back of his shirt collar and the Luger pressed against the man's head, Regis stood behind him at a window near the door. He pulled down a louver and peered outside.

A police SWAT helicopter hovered in front of the building. Its doors were open and helmeted figures sat inside, their rifles aimed at the bank. Straining, he looked south. Six police cars with flashing lights blocked the intersection of Jacob Maré and Andries St. To the north, four more patrol cars blocked Andries St about fifty metres from the bank, their front doors open, marksmen stood at the ready behind the doors. Police officers were in the park and shielding behind lampposts, statues and garbage bins. Regis had never seen so many police officers in action.

A voice speaking through a megaphone rose above the noise of the helicopter: "THIS IS THE POLICE! YOU'RE SURROUNDED! I'M SPEAKING TO THE TWO MEN INSIDE BINOMIAL! SURRENDER BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE. I REPEAT; THIS IS THE POLICE! COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!"

Another helicopter crescendo erupted. Regis peered outside again and saw an Apache military helicopter flying over the park, looming. It appeared as if it was going to ram into the bank, but then it soured out of sight. The gun- and rocket-burdened battlefield gunship frightened him.

Aluwani saw the gunship too, but already he was sweating liberally. He raised his pistol and pressed the muzzle against his right temple.

“THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!” the voice came again. “SURRENDER BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE! I REPEAT; THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!”

Aluwani’s finger slowly curled around the trigger. Most of the women watching him screamed and closed their eyes. The security guard collapsed again.

Chapter 56

On arrival at the crime scene, Det. Snr. Insp. Tony Khumalo asked if all the possible exits were sealed and all drivers found in cars parked within a radius of about two hundred metres provisionally arrested. Experience detected that there had to be a getaway vehicle somewhere. The answers from his subordinates were affirmative.

He looked about. Indeed the crime scene was condoned. A marksman was on top of each of the buildings sandwiching the bank. Scores of marksmen were in Burgers Park. If the police failed to nab the robbers, he would engage the last resort. In the joint-cooperation meeting they had talked about zero-tolerance. He would give a signal to the men in the Apache gunship. The robbers, the money and their getaway car would be blown to smithereens.

An SABC news-gathering van screeched to a halt behind the police cars parked along Andries St where the inspector was standing. A female reporter took a vintage position and started reporting with the bank in the backdrop. Det. Insp. Khumalo foresaw himself featuring on e-TV and SABC that evening; warning would-be robbers against bank robbery. He would speak beside the mangled corpses of the two robbers or the smouldering wreckage of their car. His wife and children would be proud of him. The South Africa Bank Risk Information Centre (Sabric) and the Police Minister would reward him and his team.

If the journalists weren't present, he would've drawn his service pistol to compliment the efforts of his team. Not every officer on the ground belonged to his specially trained team. His men covering Pretoria 24/7 were only twenty. Seven were on strategic positions around the bank, three were on the police helicopter and seven were on standby at Pretoria Central Police station, while three were off-duty. However, the ordinary officers that had responded were too many.

As it was, by not drawing his weapon and remaining calm he would prove his reliance on his team, after all, there were only two robbers in the bank bearing small arms. Already this was overkill. But it would put the zero-tolerance message across.

The door revolved. A man with an S-curl hairdo and in a dark suit emerged slowly carrying on his head a stuffed black plastic bag. His left hand was raised in surrender. Though he appeared calm, he was sweating copiously. A masked robber in a black baseball sweater closely clung to the man, a pistol pressed against the man's ribcage. A young trembling coloured woman of about twenty-five emerged. She too carried a similar bag in a similar fashion, and a man dangerously clung to her.

"Give me that," Det. Insp. Khumalo said to a police sergeant standing beside him. He pointed at a pair of binoculars through which the officer observed the robbers. The inspector looked through the gadget. "Who's the first hostage... a client?"

"That's the bank manager: Mr Frank Thulani," the sergeant answered. The sergeant consulted a noted book. "The woman is a teller: Miss Gladys Cremer."

The robbers were brilliant, he observed. They were so close and kept pace with their hostages that his men had to hold fire. If they got them now, there were chances the stricken men would pull their triggers, deliberately or from reflex, and kill their porters. Surely a break would present itself and his team would exploit it. But he wasn't certain of the airmen aboard the Apache gunship. It was his first time to work with the Air Force. He hoped the newcomers weren't trigger-happy fools who would endanger the man and the woman.

"Serge, you think the manager and the lady are in it?" The inspector asked still peering.

"It's difficult to tell, Inspector."

"The manager looks composed," he noted. "The woman is shaking. Where do you think they're heading?"

"They're desperate."

"Why won't they surrender, serge?"

"Desperate people always try their luck."

The inspector returned the binoculars.

The four edged across the street, every gun trained on them. The Apache gunship hovered threateningly facing the advancing pairs, while the SWAT helicopter circled procedurally at a safe distance. Violent gushes from the propellers drew litter from refuse bins and raised dust, swirling it. The draughts didn't spare the woman's decency. They flapped her top and bubble skirt violently and frequently piled the latter above her waistline. The marksmen in the park shifted backwards.

Det. Snr. Insp. Tony Khumalo grinned at the drama despite himself. Where did the men think they were going? If it were him, he would've surrendered. It was either these men were talented or they were complete amateurs. Any time bloodshed would prevail. They couldn't be professionals; they took too long in the bank. With toes peering out of their shoes, the robbers were somehow clownish. It was a pity Hollywood was too far, someone could've made a feature film from the unfolding drama.

The pairs reached the kerb on the other side and walked on; stepping on flowerbeds in the park. If one of the criminals stumbled and began falling, he would be shot before his hands touched the ground. That was how good his team was.

The Apache gunship might've taken a cue or radio instruction from the police helicopter. It soured and began circling above the police helicopter. The inspector was relieved. It would give the police precedence and prevent a mid-air collision.

When the pairs were a few metres in the park, they started moving northwards. Where're the fools going? He puzzled. Then he saw where they were going. In a thicket of flowers near the edge of the park stood an unsightly foliage-camouflaged hovel.

The construction of hovels and shacks was illegal in Burgers Park and the rest of the CBD. Where did it come from? Why hadn't municipal employees torn it down? His men had likely seen it, but had perhaps let it be thinking it was insignificant. Now the robbers and the hostages were a few paces from it.

Det. Snr. Insp. Khumalo looked warily at the hovel and the pairs, and then he relaxed. Even if they got into the structure they wouldn't

escape, and there were chances his men might find an opportunity and shoot. The inspector pulled his service pistol, a Dan Wesson Commander Classic Bobtail, and cocked it. He had waited for far too long for action. Now he was determined to fire the first shot. What the media and the nation thought about his reliance on his men was utter nonsense.

The robbers and their hostages arrived at the hovel. Crouching, their entry through a flap was quick and cautious. The woman emerged instantly without the bag and ran frantically towards the bank. The manager followed suit, but ran towards the centre of the park. Officers intercepted them and essentially led them to safety. But they were being arrested as possible accomplices.

The inspector aimed at the anomalous structure and pulled the trigger. Thunderous gunfire erupted in the park and along Andries St. Bullets tore into the hovel from all angles including the sky. The mounted machineguns on the Apache helicopter roared.

This is overkill, thought the inspector again. *The Commissioner Commanding Pretoria will see this on television and reprimand us for blowing ammunition.* He raised his pistol signalling cessation of fire. “Hold your fire! Hold your fire!”

But it took a while for the fire to die; here and there pockets of officers continued to shoot. When eventually everyone stopped shooting, muzzles smouldered. The weapons remained poised at the perforated structure.

The military helicopter came to hover over the hovel, but its gushes blew away the fabric around the erection. The material landed in front of the car behind which the inspector was shielding. It was an old piece of rail wagon tarpaulin. The fabric captured his attention briefly, what did and shocked him, was seeing what the gushes had exposed: improvised sand bags militarily arranged into a crude sandbag bunker with a narrow entrance. A frame of thin wooden poles stood desolate for a while above the bags before it crumbled.

The inspector ran to the bunker. The sergeant and two men from his special team left their cover and followed him. He expected to see two dead bodies. The construction might’ve protected the criminals

from ground fire, but nothing had shielded them from the air-to-surface fire.

Arriving at the bunker, the head of Violent Crimes and Robberies Unit stopped and shook his head. The bags were torn. Some were still spilling red soil and rubble. But the robbers and the bags of money weren't in sight. The debris-stuffed bags surrounded a narrow, rustic, dark shaft with neither a ladder nor a rope. Many officers came to stand around the bags. They cursed and sighed.

But his team hadn't nicknamed him Bolt-Cutter for nothing. He removed his jacket, cast it at the nearest officer and shoulder-holstered the Dan Wesson. As he walked through the opening in the circle, he snatched an electric torch strapped to the waist belt of a uniformed officer, pocketed it and crouched at the shaft opening. The inspector lowered himself into the boring. In numerous engagements he had led by example; this was merely another occasion to be exemplary. He looked up and saw the sergeant following suit.

The shaft was about three metres deep. On the landing, he drew his pistol and turned on the torch. A narrow tunnel stretched from the shaft towards Andries St. He crawled down it for about five metres. It burrowed into a large, dark drain with knee-high flowing water. The sergeant appeared and stood beside him.

Something brushed against the inspector's left calf. He looked down and saw a dead foetus floating between his knees. It was then that he became aware of used condoms, crumbled tissue papers and tampons floating on the water, and its pungent smell. They were standing in rain water mingled with sewer effluent. The drain stretched away endlessly beneath the street and was wide enough to accommodate a car. The torch beam caught tributary drains pouring effluent into the main one.

In either direction, the robbers weren't in sight.

Chapter 57

The video screening room at Bushido Security Company was designed like a home cinema for a dozen. The room was in semi-darkness and quiet. Ryu Masayoshi and Katherine Makgunda sat side by side in a middle row and watched a white screen in front of them. A projector beamed high-definition soundless pictures on the screen.

The first pictures showed Heidi Gaynor sleeping in her bed. Divine Kakudji and Seidu Amissah entered wheeling a stretcher. They pulled a duvet, a blanket and linen away from her, and removed her nightdress and inner garments. The Ghanaian lustfully cupped Heidi's breasts in his hands and said something. The men placed her on the stretcher and covered her with a white cloth from the head to the toes. She appeared dead. They wheeled her out of the room.

Moagi and the children featured in fused clips that followed. He was naked and separately in compromising positions with the three girls in their bedrooms. He slept with them as though they were brothel whores. And he wiped them with white handkerchiefs. The girls kissed and clung to him shamelessly. The pictures were nauseating.

Katherine sobbed and looked away, the pictures torturing her, threatening her sanity.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Makgunda," Masayoshi said, giving her his handkerchief. He watched her quietly for a minute. On the screen, the debauchery intensified.

"Please, turn it off for God's sake," she begged.

He rose and went to the back of the room. The pictures disappeared and light flooded the room. He returned to the seat next to her. They sat in silence for a long time, Katherine sobbing as if she had learnt of the death of a dear one.

He touched her hand and held it firmly, but he lacked consoling words, she realised.

“No one else will view these videos,” he said calmly. “I’ll keep them in the strictest confidence until I surrender them to you at the end of the investigations.”

She bowed her head, too embarrassed and humiliated to face him. She knew the Japanese had spoken as a gap-filler; he too seemed ravaged by the abuse.

“The cameras are still in place,” he continued. “They’ll run whenever they capture movements. This is just to prove the investigations are in progress.”

“He shouldn’t move about with bodyguards, but a psychiatric support team,” she said in disdain. “What else did you record besides these disgusting images?”

“I positioned a camera to capture a close-up of the access keypad at the entrance to the room in the basement. The mounting successfully recorded your husband punching a four-digit figure into the pad. The door opened electronically. The two men we saw earlier carted the white girl into the room. Your husband followed them inside. The door closed.”

“What could be happening inside that room?”

“I’ve no idea, Mrs Makgunda. But these men are up to no good.”

“Did you pick the four digits?”

“Five-nine-eight-eight.”

“Can you download the recordings onto a flash stick?” she asked, composing. “No one can be sure what the future holds.”

“I’ve already done so.” He gave her a memory stick. “Good luck, ma’am. I’m sure you’ll need it.”

Chapter 58

With his left hand, Moagi gently fingered the surgical scar on Katherine's brow, and with his right spoon-fed her with fried chicken served with noodles, baked ham and a caramelised onion. They were sitting side by side at the family dining table, but it was the two of them alone. A bottle of champagne in an iced holder and two champagne-filled glasses stood amid dishes.

If she discarded the sad expression on her face, he thought, the atmosphere would be romantic.

"You're stressed, Katy, and you look it, dear. You can do with some fresh air."

"What were you suggesting, sweetheart?"

"Shopping in London and Paris, dear," he proposed. "In both cities are the houses of Versace, Carolina Herrera, Chanel, Elena, Ágatha... Purificación García."

She chewed in silence for a while, ponderous. "Do we fly together, Moagi?"

"I'd have loved to, darling, but my schedules won't allow me this time. The President has tasked me to put together and chair an election campaign committee for the forthcoming general elections. I've a meeting with His Excellency Dr Min Da Yinghuang tomorrow."

"Who's this doctor?"

"He's the new Chinese ambassador to South Africa."

"We can fly after your meeting with the ambassador."

"After the meeting I'll visit the province's major prisons in Pretoria and Johannesburg." He spooned noodles into her mouth. "I'll accompany the Minister of Justice and a high-profile human rights delegation from Amnesty International headquarters in London. The delegation will be in Gauteng for five days."

"It would be great fun if the girls accompanied me."

"Schools haven't closed, dear. We don't want the girls to miss lessons."

“But I’m tired of flying to London and Paris.”

“Try Milan, Katy. You won’t regret it.”

“I’ll do my shopping in Sydney.”

“Sydney must be a remarkable alternative though.”

“I’ve never been to Australia, Moagi. But people who have been over to Australia describe it as a glorious country.”

“They talk about great shopping at the Strand and the Imperial Arcade.”

“I may get a chance to walk on the Harbour Bridge and see the Archibald Fountain.”

“But the Boeing 747 is a fuel guzzler.” He put the spoon down, picked her glass of champagne and brought it to her lips. “If you flew direct you would vanish in the Indian Ocean. You’ll fly via Yemen and refuel in that country. You’ll refuel again in Madurai, India. From India you’ll need to refuel again in Jakarta before you can safely cross over to Sydney. You still think Australia is fine with you?” He set the glass down.

“I must see Australia. I might’ve fun in that country. People who’ve been to Sydney recommend Four Seasons Hotel or the Swissôtel.”

“So Sydney it is, dear. Fly there as soon as possible. I want you to return refreshed and new.”

Divine Kakudji entered and announced: “Sir, the fumigation inspector is on the doorstep.”

Moagi made a face. “I don’t want people who pitch up unannounced. This isn’t Bushmen country.”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you, dear,” Katherine said. “The company called me. I’m sorry.”

“Do we’ve pests in this house, Katherine? I thought the company that fumigates the property twice a year was thorough.”

“A professional second opinion wouldn’t be to our detriment, Moagi. When he came the first time he said he’d return in a few days to check his preliminary baits.”

Moagi shook his head. “Let him go to the hangar, the stables and the staff compound. There’re no pests in this house.”

“We’ll give him a chance to finish what he started,” she declared firmly.

“I don’t trust fumigators.” He looked at her with mock annoyance. “Neither do I trust milkmen.” He set the spoon in the noodle bowl, clicked the knuckles of his left hand and snarled. “I want him to go away.”

“You can’t be serious, Moagi.”

“Of course, I’m serious. I don’t want that bugger here.”

She flustered. “What’re you talking about?”

“Fumigators and milkmen can leave a man’s wife pregnant.” He smiled.

A laughter of relief escaped from Katherine’s lips. “You scared me.”

“How, dear?”

“I thought you were mistrustful of me.”

He noticed that life had left her face. “Are you dating the fumigator?”

Katherine glanced at the butler and then at him, a reminder that they had company. “How could I? But if he eyes me I can use him.”

“How, Katherine?”

“I could ask him to fumigate you and the children.”

“Katy!”

“Yes. Once I eliminate you and the children, I can marry him and start life all over again. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Moagi smiled weakly and turned to the Congolese. “Show my wife’s lover in. Let no one disturb him.”

Divine Kakudji smiled. “*Yessar*.” He bowed and exited.

“When do you fly to Australia, dear?”

Chapter 59

A large python slithered at César Sergio Miguel's feet as he sat in the armchair in his bedroom. He was in a white vest and jeans trousers. The Colt M1911 and the semi-automatic Smith & Wesson .45 lay on the floor on both sides of the chair. In the other rooms, rats squeaked endlessly.

He slid a recording tape and a handwritten letter into a khaki envelope. The letter ordered the recipient to transport six million euro to a destination in Madrid. It threatened Eula, Eunice and Eurydice with death and stated that the tape's contents would be published if the money wasn't flown within two days.

He sealed the envelope and stared at what he had written on the outside:

Strictly confidential

THE PREMIER OF GAUTENG PROVINCE

HON. MOAGI MAKGUNDA

RANDLORD MANSION

WONDERBOOM, PRETORIA

After taking the parcel to a DHL office in the city centre, he would move to a lodge near Wonderboom for the next phase in case the premier wouldn't heed his threats, or set another assassin on him. The courier would deliver the parcel within the hour. He had fed the snakes in the basement enough to last them a couple of days. Two suitcases stood beside his bed, bags with clothes and basics he would need. All the money he had made so far was stuffed in one of the bags.

If things went haywire, he would use a public phone booth to call the SPCA or the Wild Life Association of South Africa, and inform them of the serpents in the house. One of the urgencies would come and clear the basement.

It was time. He rose and carefully stepped over the python at his feet, and went to the closet to find a shirt. His cell-phone on the bed rang indicating receipt of a text message. He turned before he reached the closet and picked the cell-phone.

The text message came from the premier:

*Caddie wanted urgently @
Pretoria Golf Course. White
Yamaha-Drive Cart waiting.*

César had never driven a golf cart before, or worked as a caddie though he had a layman's knowledge of golf clubs and carts. He knew what the billionaire implied; that he, César Sergio Miguel, should go to the said golf course immediately and pose as a caddie for the politician. It meant an assignment was pending and he wanted them to talk.

The parcel would've to wait until after the assignment, he thought, and, as before, when prostitutes clawed each other over him at the pool, he concealed it in the ceiling. When he walked out of the house a few minutes later, he was athletic in a striped golf T-shirt, a navy-blue Nike tracksuit, a white cap, dark glasses and sneakers. Afraid the Harley-Davidson would attract undue attention at the golf course, he decided to use public transport.

Along the street, he waved at a taxi. On the way to the golf course, he wondered if the interruption was a curse or a blessing. Blackmail, assassination and robbery were in the same category; anything could dangerously go wrong. But he quietly lamented lack of notice. Had the politician contacted him in time, he would've wired himself again to dub him, perhaps the next victim was so important that he might've raised the blackmail settlement to nine or ten million euro.

The cabdriver took short-cuts through sanitary and delivery lanes. Within half an hour, César Miguel happily paid double the fare and alighted at Pretoria Club House, a magnificent construction that looked like an upmarket inn. Many expensive cars were parked at the

building. Moagi Makgunda's Rolls-Royce Phantom TB was among them. Wafts from fried delicacies fluffed from the building.

A man in a dark suit, apparently one of the premier's bodyguards, came to meet him.

"What's your business here?" the man demanded.

"I'm Hon. Moagi Makgunda's caddie."

The man searched him briskly with a portable scanner. "He told us you were coming." The bodyguard nodded and pointed at a canopied, two-seat white Yamaha cart parked among others on the turf near the front of the building. "The key is in the ignition. He'll join you after their meeting."

There were so many trees around the clubhouse that it looked like a botched botanic garden. Bodyguards milled about. César Miguel followed a paved footpath that took him to the parked turf carts. The cart the bodyguard pointed at met the premier's description. A leather golf kit rested on the back of the vehicle. He sat behind the wheel and turned the ignition. The cart hummed into life. To pass time and to learn manoeuvring it, he drove it forwards and backwards and parked it again.

The premier came out among golfers after ten minutes. Caddies trailed behind them as did three bodyguards who took positions in the group. Moagi came to the cart, nodded noncommittally at him and pulled a club from the kit. Dutifully, César Miguel alighted, carried the kit and followed him.

The other playmates were already teeing. The billionaire joined them and teed. He held out the club for César Miguel. The Spaniard slid the club back in the kit. The golfers went to their various carts. So did the premier and the Spaniard. A few walked towards the far-flung balls.

César Miguel and the politician sat abreast. The Spaniard started the cart.

"My wife will travel to Sydney," the billionaire began as soon as the cart was moving and they were out of earshot. "I couldn't lure her to Europe. She insisted on Sydney."

The Spaniard stifled expressing shock by biting his lower lip. "Is she my new job?"

“Why would I be talking about her?”

César Miguel looked warily around him. Four trotting bodyguards were around the cart but out of earshot. “How do I get a gun in Sydney? I can’t smuggle a weapon into Australia.”

“You must’ve a friend or two in that country.”

“I don’t know any hit-men in Australia.”

The premier thought for a while. “My pilot will fly with your luggage to Sydney. Pilots aren’t subject to searching. They also have a way of evading scanner machines. The pilot will bring the bags to your hotel room. My new PA has successfully booked Katherine in the Swissôtel. A QANTAS flight will fly you direct to Sydney. You’ll stay in the Four Seasons Hotel.”

“Is the pilot in it?”

The premier shook his head. “Make sure you seal your bags with wax and paper seals.”

“How long is she staying in Sydney?”

“About three nights. Start counting the day after tomorrow. She is keen to shop at the Strand and the Imperial Arcade. I want her to return in a body bag.”

“The logistics are too much. Why can’t I do the job here?”

“It might raise suspicion. Are you turning down this job?”

“The South African High Commissioner in Australia will inform you of her death.”

They came to a culvert over a brook. César Miguel eased the cart onto the small bridge after two bodyguards overtook the vehicle and crossed ahead of them. They crossed in silence.

“But there’s a job for you before you fly to Australia.”

“Jobs are my calling.”

“One Dr O’Donovan’s offices need thorough cleaning. There’re on the eighth floor of Oosterbroek Building. It’s a small job, but it won’t be complete until his body lies in a mortuary. Find out where he resides. Determine a suitable place to retire him.”

“Don’t worry, sir.”

“I want Katherine out of the way, that’s why I’m sending her abroad,” the premier said. “She’s a clever woman who can put one

and one together. The O'Donovan job must be performed while she's out of the country."

"I'm gifted enough."

"How much do you want for these jobs, César?"

"The O'Donovan job isn't a big deal. But in Australia there's the risk of being detained far from home. Do they've the death penalty in Australia?"

"That's not a figure, César. State your price."

A cart overtook them at close range. Moagi Makgunda smiled and waved at an Arabic golfer being carted. The man did the same.

Chapter 60

Black Pepper galloped at a spirited gait towards the woods in the west of Randlord Mansion, Heidi Gaynor rocking rhythmically on his back. The horse was beginning to obey her verbal commands, and it felt good to be in harmony with the graceful animal.

She was in a cowgirl hat, a green and blue Tankini top, belted boy-leg bottoms and spiked riding boots. A Dragunov Sniper Rifle (SVD) was on her back, and a pistol, a Kimber Stainless Raptor II, was holstered around her waist. Her master had gone to Pretoria Golf Course with an entourage of bodyguards. The children were in school. Katherine was recuperating in her bedroom and had asked not be disturbed.

When the billionaire left, she went to the rifle range below the hangar and spent an hour target shooting with the Russian rifle and the Raptor II. She asked the instructor for permission to ride out armed, for the fun of it. He had no objections; in fact, he said the security department expected her to ride and move about armed within the premises.

Now saddled on Black Pepper, the horse took her on the dirt track to her favourite section of the woods with a Savannah touch and the splendid anthills. Armed with the two weapons, she had never felt so secure and adventuresome.

The horse seemed to know where they were heading. At the right spot, when they were past the eucalyptus trees, he turned and bore her gently along the footpath. The anthills appeared, marvellous in their jutting and isolation. But the horse suddenly raised its ears and stopped without her volition.

Had he seen a snake? She glanced on the stretch of the footpath ahead—nothing. Neither was there anything sinister around her. When she was about to urge him to move, she heard the sound of shovelling. It came from her left and seemed to emanate behind a thorny thicket about thirty metres from where she was. A

precautionary thought advised her to ride back and inform security. But one stemming from a sense of adventure reminded her that she was armed and should go and find out what was happening in the woods of her boss' property. What would a person carrying an SVD and a Raptor II fear?

She dismounted from the horse and tethered him with the reins by the side of the footpath. Initially, she drew the pistol, but thought it wouldn't scare an intruder; therefore she replaced it with the rifle. At the range, she fired more accurately with the rifle than the pistol.

She crouched and slowly made her way to the thicket, pausing cautiously several times. The shovelling continued. One hand on the cocking lever, she went round the thicket. Her heart beat faster with adrenalin and self-reprisal as she edged to the source of the noise. Into her view came a man shovelling behind a grove.

He was shirtless and seemingly in his early thirties. The man was shovelling earth into a small hole, his back to her. The trespasser was a stranger in old, tattered and soiled clothes; a pair of corduroy trousers and scruffy sneakers displaying his toes. A shirt equally soiled and worn out was draped on a bush nearby. The man was malnourished and had all the signs of a heavy drinker. Rivulets of sweat mottled his body.

"Hey!" Heidi shouted, drawing his attention, the rifle aimed at him.

The man dropped the shovel in his hands and turned.

"What're you doing?"

On seeing the poised weapon, he raised his hands and widened his eyes.

"Who're you?" She demanded sternly.

The man knelt in submission beside the hole, but said nothing.

She cocked the rifle. "Who're you? What're you doing here?"

"Please don't shoot," the man pleaded. "I'm Adrivas José... from Tete in Mozambique."

"What're you doing here?"

"I was burying a friend—"

"Burying a friend in someone's private property? I don't buy that."

“I’m sorry, ma’am. He was a Moslem. He insisted he had to be buried within twenty-four hours. I honoured the last wish of a friend. He bowed to Allah three times a day.”

She looked at the hole he was filling. “Was your friend a toddler?”

“He was a grown man my age.”

“Then that’s not a grave. It’s too small. What did you put down there?”

“Sebastino Zhuwau’s body is down there. In our Mozambican culture we flex a body’s backbone and the thigh bones. We bury our dead folded. Please, put down the gun. You’re scaring me.”

She ignored his plea. “What happened? How did you end up here?”

“We were on our way from a village in Tete.”

“Where’s Tete?”

“It’s in Mozambique, ma’am. We were footing to Johannesburg to find work.”

“What happened to your friend?”

“He succumbed to malaria and hunger and exhaustion.”

“But you can’t bury your friend here, this is a private property. Show me some ID.”

“We lost all our documents in the Limpopo River.”

“How can I believe you?”

“We can say some prayers and exhume the body.” He glanced at the hole. “He’s body is down there. Can I put down my hands, ma’am?”

“No. How did you get in here? This property is heavily guarded.”

“We scaled fences all the way from the border. We didn’t see any guards here.”

“Why didn’t you come to the house for assistance?”

“Is there a house nearby? We didn’t see it.”

She lowered the SVD. He lowered his hands but remained kneeling.

“What kind of work did you hope to do in Johannesburg?” She disengaged the cock.

“Clean offices, houses, cars, perhaps work underground... anything, ma’am.”

His humility, predicament and grief touched her. “I’ll give you a bit of money. You’ll buy clothes and board a bus to Johannesburg. There’ll be a bit to spare as pocket money.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He clapped his hands, a thankful gesture. “You’re very kind. Do I dig out the body?”

“The body stays, but you leave shortly. I’ve a horse nearby. I’ll ride back to the mansion and fetch you the money. Finish your job in the meantime, but make as little noise as possible. You were lucky not to have been seen and shot dead.”

“Am I in a game reserve?”

“You’re on the premises of the Premier of Gauteng.”

The man held his head and opened his mouth fearfully.

Chapter 61

Moagi Makgunda sat in his oak-panelled governmental office on the thirteenth floor of the Gauteng Provincial Government Building, his legs propped on his desk. The Nigerian hermit's final words played in his mind:

'... you shall bear three angels. They shall not lack anything for as long as you live and Konté and the portrait you'll find in the grave are in your house.' Babalwao Arugogo had paused. *"Find Konté pretty young women now and then. After several years, omens shall tell you that he needs a permanent beauty. You will find him a petite blonde in Europe. But if I were you, I wouldn't wait for the omens."*

Moagi was a happy man; things were going according to plan. Katherine would be in Sydney the day after the morrow. She left the day before aboard his private jet via Yemen, India and Indonesia. César Sergio Miguel took a direct QANTAS flight some hours ago. Katherine would return in a body bag or coffin.

An office orderly brought him *The Sunday Times Tribune*. The newspaper carried two headline stories. Both pleasantly surprised him, but he didn't show his emotions to the orderly. When the man exited and closed the door behind him, Moagi smiled. Indeed things were going according to plan. The topmost headline read:

FATHER VAN VUUREN

LAI D TO REST

Thousands attend funeral

A picture of the priest's casket, borne by robed Catholic priests including bishops and an Italian cardinal, was on the paper. So were the three albinos he brought from Green Haven. Noluthando, Linda and Norman stood solemnly by the graveside. Indeed they weren't returning to the hospice. Ironically, he thought of the infamous Bermuda Triangle and grinned.

I tempted Hendrik with money, reflected the premier. He took it. He was in the same league as Judas. Where's he now?

The second headline on the bottom half of the page equally satisfied him:

FAMILY MURDERED,
CHAMBERS SET ON FIRE
Police suspect foul play

A photograph of the interior of a fire-guttered office with an insert picture of a partially silver haired white man accompanied a journalist's report. He read the initial paragraphs:

Dr Herbert O'Donovan (58), a clinical psychologist whose practice was on the eighth floor of Oosterbroek Building in Central Pretoria, was murdered last night together with his wife, Cecilia (51), their mentally retarded son, Cuthbert (27), and their Dalmatian.

The doctor, a Georgetown University product, and his wife were found dead by the police at his house along Johann Rissik Drive near the historic Fort Klapperkop. A neighbour (name withheld) heard gunshots in the night and called the police. Their bodies were found lying on the floor in pools of blood in their bedroom. Cuthbert and the dog were found dead on the doorstep. The three and the dog were shot in the head.

During the same night, a mysterious fire gutted Dr O'Donovan's chambers at Oosterbroek Building. By the time the Fire Brigade arrived only smouldering ashes were what remained of the chambers' contents. A police spokesman, Insp. Silas Haasbroek, said the police suspected the fire was an arson attack....

Moagi folded the paper and imagined Katherine falling in a Sydney street, or would it be in a grand suite in the Swissôtel, and a pool of blood growing beneath her.

Chapter 62

At dusk, Regis quickly walked down a nameless street in a shanty slum settlement in the southern part of Soshanguve, turned, sprang over a rivulet of raw sewage flowing by the roadside and entered Agnes Lamola's shack. He found her leaning on crutches and lighting a homemade paraffin lamp. He entered as the wink caught fire, but his entry startled her stiff. She was in an old dress and a hand-sewn apron.

Regis thought she looked old and hopeless.

The sitting room was cluttered with worn-out resin sofas, a backstreet set of wooden dining chairs, a rickety, old coffee table, a battered single-door refrigerator serving as a kitchen unit, and other pieces of furniture that wouldn't be accepted in a pawn shop. A pace into the room, he stopped on realising that she was shocked to see him. He believed she had reason to be shocked; he was in a white golf T-shirt, a Lee jacket, a matching pair of jeans trousers and suede shoes. The items were new.

"What happened," she asked as soon as she recovered from the shock, gesturing at his clothes. She was slightly stooped and her weight rested on the crutch pads under her armpits.

"I came here to ask you the same question. What happened at Randlord?"

"You don't get it into your head, don't you?" The anger in her voice was palpable.

He recalled the day she appeared in court for the first time, and saw her father and a police officer wheeling her into the courtroom. Her legs were in plasters, a sling held her right arm, under her larynx and across her neck were several stitches. On the evidence desk, the miniskirt and top she wore on the tragic day spoke of the gore that prevailed in the premier's mansion. She avoided looking at him.

The public prosecutor's voice and accusing tone were still vivid in Regis' memory. The prosecutor told the court that she had a total of twelve stab wounds in her bosom, belly and thighs, that her attacker

tried to slit open her neck, that both of her femurs snapped in the attack, and that he would prove that the defendant, Regis Makgunda, the sole accused, was responsible for her injuries. After a calculated pause, he added that the prosecution team had seven witnesses and the premier of Gauteng to back its claim.

“We must talk, Agnes. I’m not your enemy.”

“I knew you’d return.” She dropped her right crutch, turned and drew a machete behind a cloth-draped table holding the lamp. Her face a fiery mask of fury, she wobbled forward to attack him. “Today I put an end to your madness.”

He pulled the Luger from the back of his trousers and held it pointing downwards.

Sight of the pistol halted her. “You came here to shoot me, Regis... to finish me off?” Her chest heaved. “Noah!” She called. “Noah!”

“Your husband isn’t here. I saw him leaving a while ago with two empty bottles of beer. I came to hear what happened.”

“What’s the gun for?”

“Guns are for killing. I should’ve flown to Miami or Port Louis in Mauritius on holiday, but I shelved the idea until I hear from you what happened. What happened at the mansion, Agee?” He raised the pistol and pressed the muzzle against his right temple. “I’ll pull the trigger if you won’t tell me.”

She pointed at him with the machete. “You ask me as if you don’t know.”

“I *don’t* know. I was drunk, you know it.”

He cocked the pistol.

“Put the gun down, Regis,” she said frantically and dropped the machete. It clattered against the crutch on the floor. “I’ll tell you what happened.”

“Tell me now, Agnes. Who attacked you?”

She started to cry. “You were part of the scheme, Reggie.” Wrath bore her words. “Your uncle paid you to bring me to his mansion.”

Regis lowered the pistol, his brow furrowing, baffled.

“Don’t pretend. You *knew*, Regis. It’s either you were drunk or you pretended. I never thought you were so ruthless. I thought you loved me.”

“I loved you, Agnes. You were my fiancée. Why did I take you to Randlord then?”

“To surrender me to a pack of jackals, that’s why.”

“Who were the jackals? I don’t understand. Didn’t you see me taking vodka?”

“You wanted to be senselessly drunk because you wouldn’t face what they’d planned to do with me.” Tears flowed in torrents down her cheeks. “Or you wanted me to think you were too drunk to protect me.”

He shrugged. “Who did what to you? Where was I?”

“Your uncle’s offer of a honeymoon voyage on his yacht was too good to be true. I believed him, Regis. But when I look back I can see it was cock-and-bull. I should’ve been suspicious. My God, I wasn’t.”

“Still you haven’t told me what happened.”

“Epilepsy saved me, Reggie.”

He briefly clutched his head with both hands, the Luger in his right hand and pointing backwards. “Is it a riddle?”

“No. I took an orange drink and passed out. When I came to I was naked and lying on my back on a stone altar. I was in a large, dimly lit room. Incense was thick in the air. On the wall was a portrait of Gregory Rasputin.”

“How did you know it was him?”

“I studied Russian History in Grade 12, Regis.”

“Go ahead with your story.”

“In the room were large smouldering gourds and earthen pots.”

“Was it a shrine of some sort?”

She nodded. “When I sat up, I was shocked to see a wooden idol standing between my thighs. It was a fierce-looking thing half a metre tall. It had a large phallus disproportionate to its size. My panties were slung on its organ. My groin hurt.”

“You’re sure you didn’t take by mistake a strong alcoholic beverage? You might’ve dreamt of these absurdities.”

“I took an orange drink.”

“Who gave you the drink?”

“The dwarf. I thought he was treating me like royalty. If I was dreaming, where did the injuries come from?”

“How were you injured?”

“I’m coming to that,” she sighed. “Everything is coming back to me now.”

“Won’t you sit down?”

Leaning on the crutch, she lowered herself into a sofa. Regis heard metal braces clicking under her dress. It hurt him to see her crying. If he had his way, he would’ve given her a compassionate embrace and wiped her tears. But Pedi culture forbade it as promiscuous behaviour. He had the utmost respect for her marriage.

He sank in another sofa facing hers, the Luger forgotten in his hand. The coffee table stood between them. Her right crutch lay beside the table.

“How did epilepsy save you?”

“I’ve been on Phenobarbitals since my childhood. A doctor prescribed me the drugs. He said I was susceptible to epileptic attacks.”

“I didn’t know you were epileptic. You never showed signs of the condition.”

“The Phenobarbitals took care of that. The jackals at Randlord had no idea of my medical history. They were supposed to overdose me for their drug to last in my bloodstream. I woke up in the middle of the ritual, thanks to the Phenobarbitals.” She took a crocheted armrest piece from the sofa and wiped her eyes with it. But tears streamed afresh from her eyes.

He watched her quietly.

“I wanted to find the exit and sneak out,” she continued, “but munching noises behind my back made me turn. I saw a very thing Indian man in nothing but a loincloth. His beard was bushy. He was sitting cross-legged in a corner among stacks of bundled money.” She paused, her face contorting. “A white corpse lay like an altar in front of him. A large oval chalice rested on the belly of the body. A small red cloth with Indian inscriptions covered the body’s private parts.

Blood and a white hand were in the vessel. I noticed a half-full bottle of rum beside him.”

“Was he the one chewing?”

“He was biting flesh off the hand in the chalice. His hands didn’t touch it. He bent and used his mouth only. Then he straightened, picked the bottle and drank.”

“Did he speak with you?”

“He must’ve put me in a trance. I sat on the altar and listened to him. I wasn’t thinking straight. Flesh and blood came out of his mouth when he spoke.”

“What was he saying? This is shocking.”

“He told me that his name was Baba Hardev Bhoopendra, or something like that, and he was an Aghori Indian who fed on albino corpses only. He pointed at the other end of the room. I saw skeletons and devoured remains of albinos... children. They were heaped on a stainless steel table and on a large freezer. I thought I was dreaming, Regis. You’re telling me you don’t know these things?”

“You’re telling me, Agee. I wasn’t a part of my uncle’s household.”

“He turned his head and spat the remains of the ground stuff in his mouth. The flesh and the blood turned into hard currency on landing. I saw loose euro, US dollars and British pounds.”

Regis shook his head in disbelief. “That’s preposterous!”

“He saw that I was baffled and told me that his master in India transmuted flesh from corpses floating on the River Ganges into vegetarian dishes.”

“Did the Indian attack you?”

“I came to my senses and rose. I was weak and hungry and drowsy.”

“He let you go?”

“He took another bite when I rose, but when he chewed and spat, no money formed. And he looked at me in anger.”

“Perhaps when you rose from the altar something happened to the processes.”

“Though I was naked, I wanted to be out of the shrine by any means. But at the door I bumped into the butler. He stood in the doorway and asked me where I thought I was going naked, and ordered me to go back to the altar. He drew an Okapi knife.”

He watched her face contort again.

She paused for composure. “I retreated, picked the idol and brandished it. I threatened to bash his head. He wasn’t scared. Then the cutting began. When he moved from the door, I dropped the idol and ran out of the room. I was wobbling, gasping and bleeding. He followed me, but I used my height advantage over him. We fought. I tried to scream but my voice was weak. It must’ve been the drugs because it echoed in my ears. He kept stabbing and cutting me.”

“Where was everybody?”

“It seemed no one was in the house. I crawled up a staircase and ended up in the main lounge. He followed me up steadily, one step at a time. I got him by the neck. We wrestled. The knife fell from his hand. I smashed a vase on his head and he collapsed between me and the door. I wrapped a tablecloth around my waist and tried to run to the door. The butler rose.”

“Why didn’t you pick the Okapi and cut the bastard to pieces?”

“I’m not a murderer. I was concerned only with escaping alive.”

“Killing in self-defence isn’t murder.”

“Killing is killing, Regis.” She stopped again and heaved her shoulders. “He came for me. I dashed to a window. I looked down outside and saw four nuns in habits, your uncle and Father Van Vuuren. They were standing by the fountain.”

“What were they doing?”

“It seemed the priest and the nuns were handing over to the premier a barefoot albino girl in their midst. Before I knew it, the butler was upon me again, stabbing and cutting. I managed to climb out of the window. I thought I’d scale down a gutter, but the dwarf cut my knuckles.” She looked at the back of her hands and shook her head in self-pity. “I fell from the first floor. The tablecloth flew away. I broke both legs and my right forearm. I passed out.”

“Why didn’t you tell the police your story?”

“I knew they’d think me insane. The police believed the account your uncle gave them.” Her tears dried; she had come to the end of her ordeal. “Where were you when all this was happening?”

“I don’t know. I woke up covered in blood. I was in a bathtub holding your panties.”

“The blood and the panties were an entrapment.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” he said thoughtfully. “My uncle could’ve made a follow-up and killed you.”

“God protects worthless people.”

They sat in prolonged silence.

“I’m sorry about what happened. Doctors abroad can fix you. I’ll foot every bill. Talk to your husband.”

“I’m not married, Regis. He’s my boyfriend. As a paraplegic, he’s the only one who understood and tolerated my disability. But he’s married.”

“Agee, you’re cohabitating with a married man?”

“Not in that sense. He’s married to beer. There’s hardly room for me in his heart.”

The paraffin in the lamp began to burn out. Regis took a two-inch thick bundle of crisp, fifty-pound British banknotes from an inner pocket of his jacket. He placed it on the coffee table as the light dimmed further and died.

Chapter 63

Katherine Makgunda arrived in Sydney, Australia, a day later than Moagi and she had anticipated because monsoonal weather delayed their take off in Jakarta for several hours. Soon after arriving in Sydney and checking into the Swissôtel at about half-past nine in the morning, she bathed, slept for about three hours, bathed again and called a taxi.

She had heard many fascinating things about Australia and her Sydney and was dying to see the city's major landmarks including the Harbour Bridge. From the bridge, they drove to the historic Rocks Precinct, the Opera House and the Botanic Gardens. The beauty and serenity in the gardens mesmerised her. She made another date with the place. It surprised her that all the city's famous attractions were within walking distance of the Swissôtel.

In a boutique in the Strand Arcade, she saw a familiar face. It was a Spaniard-looking man. He looked like an acquaintance, or was it a friend, of her husband.

About a year ago she was dining with her husband at the deluxe five-star Sheraton Hotel & Towers in Arcadia, Pretoria, when the man passed near their table. She thought he nodded at Moagi. Shortly, her husband said he wanted to visit the bathroom and left. He took ages and she became worried.

After trying his number without success, she had gone to a window to see if their car was still in the car park. It was. Seidu Amissah and a bodyguard stood beside it. But she wasn't settled. Where was he? Was he doing his political work at her expense?

She had looked for Moagi and found him in a secluded dark section of the hotel's flower gardens. The man and her husband were sitting on a bench and speaking in whispers. But when they heard the clatter of her high-heels they raised their voices, talked about the performances of the local bourse and shook hands. The man rose, bowed apologetically at her and left.

Moagi said the man was an economic consultant and he apologised for getting carried away. She never saw the man again until now, if indeed the man was he. But she couldn't be mistaken; how could she mistake a man with light dragon tattoos on his cheeks and forehead, a man who would've completely looked like Antonio Banderas had he removed the tattoos?

He was in a black Cordoba hat, a sleeveless sweater exposing Herculean tattooed arms, long khaki shorts and sandals. A red bandanna covered his neck Boy-Scout style. She walked towards him. Oddly, he was standing in the lingerie section and taking an interest in brassieres and G-strings. Did he want to buy his girlfriend or wife a present?

He was awkward in his movements, like an amateur shoplifter. She wanted to get to him and say "Hi. Do you remember me?" But before she got to him, he glanced at her and looked away. No recognition lay in his eyes. The man walked away and vanished behind some shelves.

She stopped, convinced it was a case of mistaken identity. Had it been the man, she guessed it would've enthralled both of them to bump into each other in a foreign city far from home.

Chapter 64

Sydney was a magical destination, Katherine, perched on a stool and looking out through parted curtains, observed as she peered at the city through a telescope mounted by a seaward window of her grandiose Swissôtel suite. The mesmerising skyscrapers were as marvellous as the cerulean-blue Tasmania Sea in the distance. Air sighing into her suite had a seaweed aroma. She wished she was still in love with her husband and had brought him along. The city was clean, orderly and romantic.

Through the telescope, she zoomed on shoppers and strollers in distant streets. The Australians struck her as a happy, conservative people quick to apologise when they bumped into others, which reminded her of the man she saw in the boutique in the Strand Arcade. Indeed he looked like the man her husband had spoken to at the Sheraton in Pretoria.

If it were the man, what was an economic consultant doing with a cased guitar slung across his back in a ladies' boutique? Perhaps it wasn't the man she thought he was.

Presently, as she scanned the buildings and the sea and spied on unsuspecting mid-day shoppers and strollers, she thought she was foolish. Moagi had bamboozled her into going shopping so that he would've the children to himself. But when she thought deeper, she saw that whether she was home or not, he abused the children. The shopping spree gave Bushido's cameras time to gather more evidence.

But what evidence was more incriminating than what had already been captured? From the screening room of Bushido Security Company she should've proceeded with the flash stick and her lawyer to Police Headquarters and made a report to the Police Commissioner General. Moagi was too rich and senior to be ordinarily arrested.

However, had she turned down his shopping proposal, it would've been her first time to do so, and she might've made him

suspicious. And rushing to the police with her lawyer could've been futile. The premier was well-connected in Pretoria and beyond.

She was going to sit down with Advocate Everson Gcingca and task him to investigate if there weren't personal links between the Commissioner General and her husband. The investigations required time. She would initiate them as soon as she returned.

Ground views were beginning to tire her when she decided to view eagles gliding in the Sydney sky. Swinging the telescope up, she caught sight of a shirtless man in window of a nearby building. The man was roughly on the same level as she and aimed a gun with a telescopic sight at her. He looked like the Antonio Dominguez Banderas lookalike she had seen in the Strand Arcade.

She withdrew from the eyepiece and held her bosom. Had she imagined it?

She peered again. The curtain was closed. No one was by the window. She scanned neighbouring windows and, through some, spied on intimate couples. Had she been imagining the Spaniard in the back of her mind? Had she conjured the unsettling image?

Nevertheless, she rose and closed the curtain.

No one can be completely sure of their safety in this cruel world, she thought, and prepared to leave for the Royal Botanic Gardens.

Her full-image in a wall mirror said there was nothing to change on her person. In a frilled bottle-green miniskirt, a sleeveless top and flowery iPANEMA sandals she bought in boutiques at the Strand, she was as suave and carefree as the Australian women she saw in the streets.

But now that she had an appreciation of the city's layout, she would hire a car and drive herself while pondering life after Moagi's incarceration or death. Yesterday's ride in a taxi made her detest them. Though the cabman was courteous, he was detractively talkative and threw lustful glances at her. She didn't entirely blame him; the bulbous hips of African women threw most non-African men off-balance.

Chapter 65

The target's head was squarely in the gun's telescopic sight. The range was superb, about two hundred metres for a gun that took out targets more than five hundred metres away. He held his breath and stilled his body. If he missed, it would blow everything. She would most likely seek refuge at the South African Embassy in Canberra and return to Pretoria under Australian police escort. The billionaire wouldn't be pleased with him, if this job wasn't a setup.

His finger was curling around the trigger when the target saw him. He hadn't expected it and jerked. In a flash, César Sergio Miguel pulled the Blazer R8 Professional from the ledge and withdrew from the window, the curtain flapping closed. He leaned against the wall and sighed.

Though the Swissôtel was visible from Four Seasons Hotel, he had booked another room on the thirteenth floor of a budget hotel occupying that one floor. The economy hotel was north-east of his target. In both Four Seasons and the obscure hotel, he was booked under pseudonyms. In this room closer to his target, he hoped to carry out his mission, wipe the weapon, dump it in the ceiling and return to the expensive suite to pick his frugal belongings.

As he leaned against the wall, he reminisced about yesterday's close shave. He had followed Katherine at a distance from the moment she left the airport. She used a taxi to reach the Swissôtel. He followed her in one also. But learning her floor and suite number had taxed him.

He was watching when a receptionist gave the target an unnumbered electronic card. A porter put her suitcase on a trolley and led her away. César had followed them to the lift bank amid a group of people and other porters, and boarded the same lift as the target. Gallant in a business suit like most of the men in the hotel, he had blended well. But he made sure he stood behind Katherine. On

the thirteenth floor, he walked past her suite after she and the porter vanished behind a door marked '1309'.

He had returned to his suite at Four Seasons Hotel for a change of clothes. With the Blazer R8 Professional concealed in a guitar case, he returned and waited on a concrete bench across number 68 Market St. People who saw him might've thought he was a stockman from the Outback out to enjoy the city's sights and perhaps find love.

He had expected her to take a walk that morning; Sydney was a city that harassed visitors to see it. She left in a taxi. Again he had followed her in one until both were walking on the Harbour Bridge. Later, both alighted from the taxis and walked into the Imperial and then the Strand Arcade.

But in the Strand he had lost her and panicked. He ran into a number of shops until he got into a boutique. She had seen him and surprisingly walked towards him as if to meet an acquaintance. He looked at her noncommittally and vanished. Was it possible that she recognised him from a meeting he had with her husband at the Sheraton about a year ago?

Perhaps Moagi Makgunda wanted to eliminate him and had set him up. The woman he was stalking might be Katherine's double. Wasn't he going to be arrested in Australia and thrown into a dank penitentiary in the Outback?

Katherine sat on the bed, put the suite's telephone extension in her lap and dialled the receptionist. "Good afternoon," she said into the receiver. "Kindly connect me to a reliable car rental company. I want one that'll deliver a car immediately."

"Hold on, ma'am." A moment later the receptionist said: "You're through to Sydney Car Hire."

"Thank you." A connection click followed. "Hello."

"Hello." A male voice replaced the receptionist's. "This is Sydney Car Hire. How can I help you?"

"I need a sports car for two days."

"We've Ferraris, Corvettes and Lotus Evoras in stock."

“I’ll try a Lotus Evora. Tell me about it.”

“It’s the world’s sole mid-engine two-plus-two sports car. If handled properly it can outperform any sports car.”

After she finished on the telephone, she went to close the windows.

Chapter 66

César Sergio Miguel unclipped the gun's telescope and set the weapon against the wall. He opened a very small gap between the curtains and peered across rooftops at the target's suite. Katherine was closing the windows. Surely Sydney was a mesmeric city; it invited its visitors to see it.

He needed to be in front of her hotel in the next couple of minutes, or he would lose her again. Quickly, he disengaged the cock, reattached the telescope and crossed to the bed where the guitar case lay open and empty. His small arms, the Colt M1911 and the semi-automatic Smith & Wesson .45, together with a white short-sleeved T-shirt and a loose denim casual shirt, were on the bed too.

The rifle went into the case. The guitar case was making him too conspicuous. The target had seen a man with the case. She wasn't going to see that man or his likeness again. He took the loaded case to the en suite bathroom. Stepping on the toilet seat and then on the cistern, he shoved the concealed weapon into the ceiling through a trapdoor.

Returning to the bed, he wore the T-shirt, tucked the Smith & Wesson in the back of his trousers, the Colt in front, and covered them with the denim shirt. He walked out of the room in dark shades and carrying a folded copy of *The Herald Sun*. A conical, traditional Chinese hat, a purchase from a curio shop, covered his head.

A lift whisked him to the ground floor. Across the building's foyer, he walked nonchalantly, whistling, his head held high, but when he was out in the streets he trotted to the Swissôtel. The job had to be done in the shortest time possible or the target would fly back. Moagi hadn't been sure how long she would stay in the city.

When he took a bend and the façade of the Swissôtel appeared in front of him, he saw Katherine in sunglasses, a miniskirt and a sleeveless top. A white handbag dangled from the crook of her arm. She was viewing an Aspen-white sports car parked in the drop-off zone in front of the entrance. A man in a blue uniform appeared to

be telling her about the car. The uniformed man went round the car with her.

César Miguel crossed Market St and went to the bench he had sat on earlier, and sat down. He unfolded the newspaper and spied on his target over it.

Across the road, the uniformed man finally handed Katherine a tagged key. She got into the car and eased it out of the premises. César waved a taxi to a stop and boarded. The taxi followed the sports car at an unsuspicious distance. Katherine, or her double, drove to the flamboyant restaurant nestled in the Royal Botanic Gardens. The Spaniard paid the cab driver extra for obedience. The taxi drove away.

Seemingly fascinated by the vegetation around the car park, he loitered in the area, waiting for her, waiting for the creation of an opportunity to pounce and then wait for other jobs, or blackmail the billionaire and fly to Madrid. But at the back of his mind, he puzzled if this was indeed Katherine.

From the car park, he spotted her on a table on the restaurant's veranda, sitting among chattering diners. A waitress brought her food. She ate slowly, thoughtfully. After the meal, she strolled through the gardens, viewed the Pyramid Glasshouse and stood at the Ponds. She was sipping a packet of fruit juice. Grey-headed flying foxes roosting in the garden's trees fascinated her.

He followed her cautiously. It worried him that there were too many tourists and strollers in the gardens. If she strayed to a section with fewer people, or to the Palm Grove, he would take her down, discard the shirt and the hat and vanish. By sunrise the next day, he would be in Melbourne booking a Lufthansa flight to South Africa. He had done his research very well.

At three o'clock, about an hour thirty minutes after she set foot in the gardens, the woman he risked as Katherine returned to her rental car and drove out of the gardens. The Spaniard got into a taxi waiting in the designated area of the car park, and instructed the cabman to drive out of the gardens. The taxi was a yellow vintage Chevrolet station wagon with intricate designs, perhaps to catch tourists. From the garden they emerged into dense Sydney traffic.

“Follow that car,” he said to the driver. “My wife is in it. I suspect she’s seeing someone.”

“Which one?” The cabman asked pointing in front. “The red one?”

“No. The white one overtaking.”

“That’s a Lotus Avora, my friend!”

“It can’t go beyond the legal limit.”

“If the driver steps on the gas you’ll need a Mig-fighter to catch them red-handed.”

The Avora steadily traced the outer western edge of the gardens, turned east and then south onto Art Gallery Rd. It began accelerating rapidly and overtaking until it was outside Sydney on the highway to Wollongong. The taxi tried to keep pace, but the sports car appeared to transmute into a diminishing blob in the distance. It vanished before their eyes on an endlessly straight stretch.

“I told you,” the driver said, gesturing helplessness. “Is it the boyfriend driving?”

“She’s by herself.”

“She’s daring. She must try stunt driving.”

“Why don’t you consider driving a hearse?”

“This car was a hearse. We converted it.”

“Take me back to the city centre, undertaker.”

Chapter 67

The dashboard clock pegging the time at 23:30 hrs, Katherine Makgunda drove the Lotus Avora down a ramp to the basement car park of the Swissôtel. She was tired. The four-hundred kilometre drive to Canberra via Wollongong had drained her of strength. But she had enjoyed every moment of it behind the wheel of the sports car.

While she wanted to drive around the administrative city of Australia and sight-see, she also wanted time alone to refocus, the reason she avoided the two-hundred and eighty-seven kilometre Hume Freeway, which could've taken her to her destination within two hours. By half-past five she was already in Civic, Canberra, and watching the sun setting. Had she arrived earlier, she might've viewed Greg Chappelin's cricket cap and other artefacts in the National Museum, just to satisfy curiosity.

She had driven round the Parliament Building and along the Embassy Drive in the suburb of Yarralumla, and spotted the South African High Commission. Knowledge of its location would help her in case of trouble. Surprisingly, her husband hadn't arranged security contacts for her as was his custom whenever she travelled abroad. Perhaps he had overlooked it, she thought, and went on to view Lake Burley Griffin. If she had had time, she would've taken a cruise or ferry and decked in a bikini. At a precinct cafeteria in Acton, she parked the car and sipped coffee under a large umbrella. The experience was refreshing.

Now she was back in Sydney and itching to rest. All the parking slots seemed taken.

A 1970s, black vintage Zephyr Zodiac jalopy pulled behind her. The bays were well-lit, but some sections were shadowy due to light obstruction. Except for the car behind her, every vehicle underground was stationary. No one was in sight. The jalopy trailed her for a few metres, suddenly turned and drove against one-way arrows on a lane.

She shrugged. The driver was likely in a hurry and might've lost patience with her. After traversing the first half of the car park, she concluded that the jalopy might've found parking.

Several turns later she reached the back of the basement and found two vacant slots next to each other. Katherine parked the car, closed the windows automatically and turned the engine off. She was climbing out of the vehicle, the sunglasses stuck in her hair, the handbag hanging from her left arm, when the cocking click of a pistol drew her attention.

She turned sharply. A man in a traditional Chinese hat was emerging from the blind side of a pillar to her left. He was less than ten metres away and walking briskly, a shiny pistol in his hand pointing downwards. She recalled glancing at him in the car park of the restaurant in the Royal Botanic Garden. In the afternoon she hadn't thought much about him. Now she reasoned that he was likely a robber attracted by the sports car.

She stood still and stretched out the handbag. "There's money and jewels in it."

"I'm not an Abyssinian cat, Katherine," he charged, pressing the pistol against her temple and shoving her with his free hand against the car.

The bag fell from her hand. She cringed and raised her hands, recognition dawning on her. It was the man she saw in the Strand Arcade, the man her husband had said was an economic consultant – the man with light dragon tattoos on his cheeks and forehead. She was petrified.

"Moagi sent me to kill you," he said between gritted teeth, "I thought you should know." He forced her head to the floor. "Do you prefer to be killed or to give up the ghost?" he asked and laughed.

She was opening her mouth to scream when a gunshot rang. Deafened, she slumped on her back, but no part of her body hurt. Was she hurt beyond perception? Was the painless state a prelude to death? It was a moment of rapturous perplexity. But instantly, she realised she wasn't hit. The shot had come from the right. The assassin was jerking and doubling, a scarlet patch growing below his right ear.

Her eyes ogled. What was happening? Sitting up, she glanced in the direction the shot had emanated from. A dark man in a single-breasted printed shirt was approaching. He was about twelve metres away and held a poised pistol. Her teeth clattered.

But the assassin didn't fall; instead, he pulled the trigger and fired two shots at the front side window of a car park across the vacant slot, and staggered towards it, stooped, grunting and disoriented. The shot vehicle flashed its hazard lights and its alarm began shrieking. The Spaniard waddled across the empty slot and rammed against the car. He leaned sideward against it and sank to the floor, the pistol falling from his hand.

The second man arrived at her, glanced at the assassin now slowly lying down on his back in a deathly stupor, kicked the dropped pistol away and picked Katherine's handbag. He was an Aborigine of about forty, hairy and hefty.

"Thank you, thank you," she said, shaking. "You saved my life. Are you a police man?"

"I'm an Aborigine," he said inadequately in a clipped accent. "Get up!" He gripped her right upper arm, pulled her up and dragged her from the Lotus Avora, away from the pedestrian exit of the basement. Her sandals and the sunglasses slipped off.

His right hand held her handbag and his firearm. His left hand held her impersonally. But when they had walked a few paces, he stopped and turned, dropping her handbag and firing. She looked back. The assassin had sat up, his legs stretched in front of him, but another pistol was in his hand and he was aiming at them.

The Aborigine's pistol cried twice in quick succession. Bullets tore into the Spaniard's chest. The Antonio Banderas replica pointed his weapon at the basement roof and fired three times, drunkenly. The Aborigine fired again, hitting the assassin above the right eye. The man dropped his pistol and slumped on his back. Katherine had never seen so much blood gushing out of a human being.

Without letting go of her, the Aborigine picked her handbag and commandeered her away, running this time. His strength and agility amazed her. The man wasn't a police officer; she saw it in the way he manhandled her. She wanted to scream again, but thought it would

enrage the fierce-looking man into killing her instantly. They crossed three rows of cars and came to the Zephyr Zodiac. The vehicle was idling and revving itself.

From the direction of the basement entrance, she saw two security guards running towards them. Their firearms were drawn and one of them began blowing a whistle. She assumed she would sit in the car with him, but he kicked the boot's lid, opening it. He threw her and her handbag inside and slammed shut the lid. The boot was dank, completely dark and smelled of sheep.

She heard him jump into the car and shut the door. The jalopy screeched into motion, turning and surging, hurling her backwards. It roared, gathering speed, and threw her to a corner as it turned again, its tyres shrieking ceaselessly. The smell of burnt rubber filled the boot. She coughed like a whooping cough sufferer. More whistles shrilled in the basement. Then she felt the car going up an incline, and knew that they were on an exit ramp.

Gunfire erupted around them. Four bullets tore into the confinement and swished inches above her head. She screamed and lay flat, curled like a foetus. Within seconds, she heard a crash, the clangour of an iron beam falling on a hard surface, and an acceleration screech. Since this happened at the incline, she knew he had driven into a boom by the basement guardroom.

After they had taken several bends and the gunfire had long died, she peered outside through one of the bullet holes. They were in a lit, double lane tunnel. The jalopy was overtaking at a disastrous speed. The car kept surging forward. Shortly it shot out of the tunnel, went over a curved, elevated expressway and then veered into a long sanitary lane. She saw roused vagabonds pressing themselves against walls after standing out of harm's way.

The car left the city. When she peered outside again, Sydney appeared like a luminous construction of miniature skyscrapers. She cursed herself for not having purchased an Australian SIM card or brought her cell-phone to Australia; though her South African line wasn't recognisable by the networks of her host country, 911 was ever accessible. A description of what she was seeing could've helped the police to track the car.

After about an hour, the Zephyr Zodiac swerved onto a bumpy gravel road, never slowing down. Dust invaded the boot and blinded her. She coughed increasingly.

Who was this man? Where was he taking her? He said he was an Aborigine, and he looked it. Fearing he was taking her to his tribe to make a sacrifice out of her, Katherine began banging the hood desperately.

Chapter 68

After about three hours of rough driving, the jalopy slowed down and turned. She observed that they had driven through a rustic farm gate decorated with large pioneer wagon wheels on both sides. The car stopped and the Aborigine went to close the gate. He was soon in the car and driving, but with less haste this time. They came to a stop about four hundred metres away. Many dogs were barking and growling.

She heard his door open, the rattling of a heavy chain almost muffled by the barking, and then heard him closing the door. They drove through a second gate and stopped. Three Labradors and two mastiffs accompanied him when he came to close the opening. The gate was tall and broke a high security fence crowned with hurricane razor-wire spirals.

A Labrador came to sniff the area around the bullet hole she was peering through, and began barking at the car boot. The rest of the dogs joined it. At that height and closeness, she saw inside the tail-light-lit mouths of the canines, and had no doubt the dogs could devour her within moments.

The dogs chased the car, barking and drooling. It drove into a garage beside a large lit Victorian farmhouse. He went round the car and ordered the dogs away in his strange language. The dogs left the garage and vanished. The man held his pistol and a black folded fabric. He kicked the boot open, instantly slid a stringed pillowcase over her head and secured it around her neck. Katherine had never been so frightened and helpless.

The man heaved her onto his right shoulder, her legs up, her head down, and walked away with her. The stench of sweat and tobacco was heavy on him. A breeze informed her they were outdoors. Then he opened a door, stepped in, closed and bolted it. She guessed they had entered the Victorian house.

He bore her effortlessly, opening and closing doors, and descended some steps to a basement. She heard him open yet

another door, which proved to be the final one. A few paces into the room, he set her on a cane portico chair, drew her hands to her back and handcuffed her. Then he tied her to the chair using three lengths of thin rope; one for each of her legs, the third one strapping her wrists to the chair's backrest. The handcuffs and the ropes hurt.

The Aborigine untied the pillowcase, removed it and stepped backwards. She was in a rustic well-lit farmhouse office decorated with animal trophies and hides. A lean white man in a silver suit sat facing a laptop on a computer station by a wall. His back was to her. An ivory walking cane, an artefact adorned with ethnic engravings of African game, lay across a desk between them. Her handbag stood beside the cane. Her miniskirt and top were soiled. Her limbs were bruised.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Makgunda," the man said to the wall. "How's Eurydice, Eula and Eunice? Lovely girls, aren't they?"

Neither British nor Australian, his accent was eccentric. "Who're you?"

"I'm a well-wisher doing the honours of welcoming you to Australia. How does it feel to have a billionaire for a husband?"

"Who're you?" she repeated.

He swivelled the chair around, faced her and crossed his legs. He was about sixty. His ocean-blue eyes struck her as reptilian. He picked the cane and toyed with it. "Your husband overlooked providing you with security. But bodyguards dote around your daughters all the time."

"My husband doesn't love me. That's the truth. He'll not pay ransom for me."

"Don't play the fox, Mrs Makgunda. That's a very old trick." He smiled charmingly. "We've never met. You'll allow me to introduce myself."

He spoke as if she had a choice. She hid her resentment of his arrogance.

"People call me Mr Scott Randall. I'm an international freelance broker. You'll call me Mr Randall. Hon. Makgunda is my business partner and enemy at the same time."

"What has that got to do with me? Why am I here?"

"I'm kidnapping you, Mrs Makgunda. Or should I say *I have* kidnapped you?"

"What do you want?"

"Don't be tempted to think I'm after ransom."

Katherine was puzzled. "Why've you kidnapped me then?"

"Your husband promised me a lump sum. I did a job to his satisfaction. The man didn't keep his word. When I number my enemies, his name tops the list. I may be handsome, but I'm not a good man, especially when I'm angry."

"The man the Aborigine killed at the Swissôtel was hired by my husband to kill me."

"Aborigine... Swissôtel? Who killed who and why? How?"

She pointed behind her and turned, only to find no one behind her. It was only this Mr Scott Randall and she in the room.

"No one killed anybody. Australia is more peaceful than the Vatican. However, when I plan my things I don't want people who stand between me and my goals. Don't ever mention what happened at the Swissôtel, or you'll sit in the gallows for it. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "I was telling you that my husband doesn't love me—"

The charming smile returned to his face. "A storm in Paradise, that's what you want me to believe? You're happily married, Mrs Makgunda. You and your husband are Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise. When we're done and my dues are in my coffers, I can take you to Santa Monica for you to meet this great Australian couple."

"Mr Randall—" her voice broke off. She sighed, short of words. "I'll put it plainly. You and I've a common enemy."

He snorted. "Allow me to listen to your heads of arguments." He spoke like a High Court judge in his chambers.

"I've a memory stick in the left cup of my bra."

"Are you seducing me, Mrs Makgunda?"

"Things are askance between me and my husband." She pointed at her left breast with her chin. "The evidence is in the bra. Come and take it, Mr Randall."

“Is it some trick? I must warn you against putting your life in danger. I’ve treated you like the Queen of England so far.”

“We’re bickering, Mr Randall. Are you afraid of a tied woman?”

Challenged, he smiled, rose and stepped casually to her. He towered over her and slowly, humming, slid a hand in the left cup of her brassiere and drew a flash stick. He scrutinised it as if its contents showed on its surfaces, strode to the laptop and inserted it. “What do we’ve here?”

“There’s only one item on it. Just play it, Mr Randall.”

He stepped from her line of vision and leaned on the desk, his back hunched.

As a picture came up on the LCD, Katherine looked away. She shunned looking at the images again, images that pierced and wrung her heart.

“Christ!” he kept remarking, scandalized, as he watched the playback. Then she heard him whistle in disbelief and curse. After about ten minutes, she heard him deactivating the flash. He sighed and resumed his seat. “I’ve done all sorts of deplorable things with children, but not with my *own* children.”

She looked at him. He appeared as if he had taken vinegar and raw garlic.

“I saw a white girl being carted on a trolley. What’s happening in the mansion?”

“I really don’t know, but I can liken the house to glittering gallows.”

He scratched his head thoughtfully and suddenly brightened. “I’ll keep the flash and let you go.” He toyed with it between his fingers.

“No. So far it is the only thing I’ve that can see him arrested.”

“Moagi can argue that it isn’t him on the videos. The man can line-up expert filmmakers and convince the courts that videos can be doctored. The law is a game of chance.”

“But I want him to go to jail and suffer for this.”

“Mrs Makgunda, what would you benefit from his incarceration?”

“I want him to hang for it.”

“He’s a proud man who safeguards his reputation. He’ll kill himself before the police get to him. But how’d that profit you?” He asked, opening his palms. “Make dough out of him.”

“I don’t want a single penny of his dirty money.”

He chuckled. “You’re speaking out of wrath. Already half of his wealth is yours; you’re married to him. Get him out of the way and you become *the* billionaire.” He placed the flash on the desk, rose, went round the desk, squatted beside her and began to untie the ropes.

“Mr Randall, how did you know I’d come to Sydney?”

Without looking up at her he said: “There’s a pretty girl who told me her name was Rosella when I first met her.” He spoke like one narrating a folktale to a grandchild. “I called her wee Rosella. She’s at Randlord now.”

“There’s no Rosella at the mansion.”

“Her name is Heidi Gaynor. That’s the girl they carted in the video. I communicate with her every day.”

Chapter 69

Moagi Makgunda lounged in a sofa in the main lounge. The children were in school. Katherine was likely in a body bag in Australia. He hadn't reported for work that day at the Provincial Government Building because he woke up restlessly worried about lack of conformation from César Sergio Miguel, or the South African High Commissioner in Canberra, that Katherine was dead. In fact, he hadn't heard from the Spaniard since the day he left. He hated being left in the dark. His deputy would've to shoulder all the work until he learnt of her death.

But if for some remote reason Katherine returned from Sydney, he would kill her himself and make sure her body was never found. Without a body, murder became a controversial fallacy. He would set an assassin on César Sergio Miguel.

The Spaniard knew too much and he, Moagi, had been reckless with words when he hired him. He should've spoken with him in a Jacuzzi or swimming pool, when both of them would be semi-nude, which would've assured the politician that he wasn't being dubbed. As it was, he lived in fear of blackmail. After the Lefoka job, someone would gun down the Spaniard.

As he lounged alone dressed like a Nigerian nobleman in a gold-rimmed white fez and a lacy, fluttering top overlapping his knees and a matching trousers, he reminisced about his life hitherto. He acknowledged that he was tired of luxury, shinning down his peers and performing diabolic rituals. Because of what a section of his mind deemed immoral and despicably obscene, he lived in comfort and luxury and enjoyed the assured goodwill of the society.

Of sleeping with his daughters, he was weary and sore in the loins. Over the years he had grown tired of hearing a faint ambivalent voice that accused him of being a sham father that thwarted the lives of his daughters before they had begun. However, he took solace from his practical perspective of life. He had given his daughters a quality life full of pomp and fanfare. They tested luxury at a tender

age. By availing themselves to him they orchestrated his wealth and insured their future.

Divine Kakudji opened the door and walked in. "Sir, Regis Makgunda is on the doorstep."

Resentment covered the premier's face like a shutter. "How's he dressed?"

"Like a gentleman, sir. He's in an English suit."

"Did he sound sane?"

"He greeted me civilly enough and smiled."

"How did he get here?"

"By taxi. The vehicle has just left."

"It means he intends to stay. Is he alone?"

"He came alone, sir."

"That's sad. I thought he'd come to introduce a new girlfriend." He paused. "The boy last set foot here two and a half years ago, you'll remember. I've ill feelings about the purpose of his visit. Isn't he armed?"

"No. But I wouldn't know if there're weapons under his clothes."

"Searching him would be downright rude. Lock all the doors after he enters. That includes the main door."

"*Yessar.*"

"You and Seidu will stand in the wings for as long as he's here. This visit isn't a blessing." He pondered for a while. "If he means trouble, kill him quietly with a knife or an axe."

"*Yessar.*" The butler left the room.

Moagi waited, wondering what his first words with Regis would be, and what had transformed the life of the vagrant. Above all, he worried about the purpose of his visit. Did he now know? Had he come for a showdown?

The premier wished he had set César Sergio Miguel to find the whereabouts of Agnes Lamola and pay her a visit at night. It was never too late to eliminate her. The crippled woman would be the Spaniard's next assignment.

After several minutes the butler led Regis into the lounge. Seidu Amissah trailed. The Congolese held a pistol and a loaded magazine; the former by the tip of its butt as if it was criminal evidence he

didn't want to contaminate with his own fingerprints. Moagi stood up.

"He looked suspicious," the butler said, placing the weapon and the magazine on a coffee table in front of the premier. "We thought it was wise to search him."

"The guards at the gate thought you were family and didn't search you. What demons possess you, my boy?"

Chapter 70

Regis Makgunda waited for the butler and the chauffeur to leave. The lounge had three exits. The dwarf used an eastern door while the Ghanaian exited in the opposite direction through a western one. Regis mutely questioned why none of them used the main and northern one behind their master. Moagi remained standing.

“Is that how you welcome a nephew you last saw in prison garbs years ago, Uncle?” He smiled. “How’s Hardev?”

“Who’s Hardev?”

“Baba Hardev Bhoopendra, the Aghori Indian in the basement. How’re his reserves of albino flesh?”

“What’re you talking about?” Moagi glanced at the pistol on the table. “That’s a Glock G21. Your father owned a Luger. Have you come to thank me for giving him a decent burial while you languished in remand prison?”

“If my father had used the Luger, he’d still be alive today.”

“How’d he have used it?”

Regis bent and said: “By shooting you like this—” He pulled his left trouser up and drew the Luger from an improvised holster around his left shin and, straightening, aimed it at the premier.

As Moagi made croaking sounds from half-formulated words, and raised his hands in surrender, Regis bit his lower lip and pulled the trigger. The billionaire cringed, but the Luger only clicked. There was no bang. The butler and the Ghanaian chauffeur burst into the lounge through the different doors they had used to exit.

The dwarf brandished a three-star Okapi flick knife, the Ghanaian a fire hydrant chopper. But they stopped in their tracks on setting their eyes on the Luger. Regis pointed the pistol at Divine Kakudji and then at Seidu Amissah. The employees stepped back and raised their hands, but both didn’t drop their weapons.

The employees weren’t a threat, Regis thought. Once their master lay dying, they wouldn’t have cause to attack him. He pointed the

pistol at Moagi, aiming the chest. Chances of missing were few. Regis pulled the trigger again. The weapon crackled and the magazine dropped to the floor, spewing two bullets. A third bullet fell out of the gun's chamber.

Moagi Makgunda lowered his hands in disbelief. "God loves me." He laughed raucously. "What're you waiting for?" he suddenly barked at his employees. "Kill him!" He sank in his sofa, crossed his legs and watched the drama contentedly.

The Ghanaian hurled the chopper at Regis' head. He ducked. The weapon spun past him, missing him by a whisker, and stuck into a decorative wooden ethnic mask in the wall behind Regis. The butler closed-in swinging the Okapi as the chauffeur ran about in search of another weapon.

In a desperate move, Regis threw the pistol at the butler. The Congolese dodged. Smiling good-naturedly, he swung the knife ruthlessly and cut him in the forearms and the right thigh. The dwarf was calculating, cunning and swift. Regis tried to move backwards, out of the Congolese's reach, but the short man kept pace with him, smiling and swinging the knife. When he reached the back wall, Regis' suit was torn to rags and bloody, and he was limping.

"Shred the boy, Divine!" Moagi urged.

The Ghanaian, not to be outdone in the presence of their master, opened a low wall unit and took out a short, curved sword. Regis saw that it was an afghan; for stabbing and ripping. The chauffeur stood beside the dwarf and gently pushed his workmate away for the honours to finish their prey off.

The switch provided Regis with a brief break he had longed for ever since he reached the back wall. Turning, he yanked out the chopper from the wooden mask and swung it at the Ghanaian's head in one movement. Since he hadn't had time to hold the weapon properly, the back of the blade struck the chauffeur on the forehead.

The sound of crushing bone prompted Moagi to reach for the Glock G21 and its magazine on the table as the Ghanaian dropped the afghan and swung, dazed and falling. The dwarf retreated some paces, his smile vanishing. Behind the Congolese, the premier rose, battling to insert the magazine into the pistol.

Divine Kakudji cautiously stepped back from the mismatch of their weapons, but his eyes were on Regis, like a mongoose looking out for an opportune moment to claw a mamba. Regis followed him slowly; rushing would scare the dwarf into fleeing, and the injuries in his thighs were excruciating. He wouldn't be able to catch the dwarf if he fled. Behind Divine, his uncle continued to busy himself frantically with the Glock G21 and the magazine. Several bullets spewed from the magazine onto the table and the carpeted floor.

When he saw that the Congolese, in his blind retreat, was a pace from a low glass table in the centre of the room, Regis feigned swinging the chopper. The butler jumped backwards and stumbled on the table. He fell over it, smashing its glass panel as his pursuer came upon him like a swooping eagle. With one swing, Regis bludgeoned his head with the back of the chopper. Using the blade's cutting edge had the danger of wedging in the man's skull.

When he looked up, he saw the premier dropping the Glock G21 and the magazine and running towards the main exit, which was behind the sofa he sat in. Regis hurled the chopper. His uncle's haste and Regis' desperation to kill him lent the weapon's trajectory a slow-motion illusion. Moagi was about to vanish from the doorway when the chopper's blade found its mark in his right shoulder blade, and wedged.

The premier screamed in agony and stopped in his tracks, his back curving like a bow, his left hand trying to reach the chopper. The fabric around the blade reddened. Moagi staggered out of sight, the weapon hanging from him.

Injuries prevented Regis from running after his uncle, whose injury didn't appear immediately fatal. If the premier received prompt medical attention, he would live to laugh at his nephew again, perhaps with a lame right arm or side. Regis picked the Glock G21, the acquisition from the Binomial security guard, and its magazine.

On all fours, he frantically gathered the scattered bullets in his hand, shoved a few into the magazine and the rest into a hip pocket. The G21 and its bullets had to be removed; otherwise they would point at him as one of the two criminals who robbed the Andries St branch of the Binomial Bank of South Africa.

If he had used this pistol, the wolf would've been dead by now. He slid the magazine into the weapon, rose and limped out of the lounge into a passage. Moagi was nowhere in sight. But the chopper was on the floor about five metres from the door. Traces of blood on the carpeted floor marked the premier's escape route.

Ignoring his pain, Regis picked the chopper and followed the traces. His progress was gradual. In his wake, his bloody shoeprints belittled the premier's. He wanted to hear from his uncle's mouth the premier's version of what happened to Agnes Lamola, and to see if he would laugh again the way he had laughed when the Luger jammed and released the magazine.

A side door opened behind him, startling Regis. He turned and saw a petrified maid in a uniform. Holding a feather-duster and staring at him in horror, she retreated and banged shut the door.

His uncle's blood trail took him to a staircase. As he descended rang by painful rang, he held on to the rail in an attempt to ease weight off his legs. The staircase took him to the ground floor. Where was his uncle? Was he getting away? Regis wished he could run. If the man got away, the premier wouldn't have to fabricate much to see to it that Regis hanged. Already the Congolese and the Ghanaian were dead.

The blood led him away from the main door to another staircase, which he descended in rapturous agony again, until he reached the basement and became aware of a riot of smells; bactericides, disinfectants and incense. He followed the traces to a closed sliding steel door. The stains vanished under the handle-free door. Distinct humming and a cleaving sound, or was it a thrashing sound, came from the room.

Chapter 71

At the handle-free steel door in the basement, Regis looked about, thinking. His eyes rested on an eye-level keypad console by the door. He stood back and struck the console repeatedly with the chopper. The injuries in his forearms hurt. The console deformed and emitted contact and electrical sparks. He continued to strike it until its face panel fell off.

Regis placed the chopper against the wall and stared at four colour-coded wires hanging out of the console. He embarked on attaching different wires at random until an electric motor whirred behind the door, which slowly slid open. The humming increased, but the cleaving or thrashing sound had stopped.

He armed himself with the chopper and peered inside the room. The interior was exactly as Agnes had described it. Moagi wasn't in sight. The young white woman he met in the woods lay naked and inert on the altar. A ferocious wooden statue stood between her thighs. A very thin and pale Indian in a dirty loincloth sat cross-legged among stacks of money in a corner. The man's hair was dishevelled. His beard was wild. The body of a teenage albino lay before him, an improvised altar holding a blood-filled chalice and a cancerous white foot. A bottle of rum stood near the Aghora.

"Where's he?" he asked the Indian.

"He walked in and fell dead here," the weirdo said lazily, pointing at a bloodstained machete and a scythe laying between the altar-corpse and the one on which Heidi Gaynor lay.

Regis saw blotches of blood and shreds of flesh, and Moagi's mangled and torn Nigerian nobleman's attire.

"I think he wanted me to eat him."

"You ate him?"

"You can't eat an adult in five minutes." He lifted a frail arm, a collection of veins and bones, and pointed. "He's behind you."

Despite his pain, Regis turned sharply, raising the chopper. Nobody stood behind him. "Hey, what're you saying?"

“He died in front of me because he wanted me to eat him.”

“You *ate* him then? Tell me the truth, Baba Bhoopendra. You’re a saint.”

“I couldn’t eat him. I partake of albino flesh only.”

“Where did he go then?”

“He’s in the freezer.” He pointed again. “I cut him to pieces. I couldn’t carry him.”

The freezer was behind Regis. He shuffle to it and opened its horizontal door. Moagi Makgunda’s body lay quartered alongside stacked albino remains. His head was on top of the quarters. His eyes stared blankly.

Regis stood at the freezer looking inside, boggled and astounded by the freezer’s contents. He didn’t know whether to attack the Indian or leave him alone. “Why do you eat albinos, Baba Bhoopendra?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Your new master wants to know.”

“Everything that exists must be perfect. To deny the perfection of anything would be to deny the sacredness of all life, and to deny God. Human meat, especially albino flesh, removes hatred from my soul. It makes me one with Lord Dattatreya and God. When I eat it or cover myself in cremation ashes, Smashan Tara, Tara of the Cremation Grounds, blesses me with supernatural powers.” He gestured at the stacks of money. “Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead because He was perfect.”

Initially Hardev Bhoopendra’s voice was proportionately distant, but when he mentioned the Saviour he sounded as if he was behind him. Regis turned. Indeed the Aghora stood behind him. The scythe and the machete were raised in his right and left hand respectively.

The scythe descended at an angle, to hack Regis’ neck, as did the machete a split-second later. Regis dodged and dropped the chopper. The weapons struck the open freezer, sending sparks flying. The Indian stepped over the chopper towards Regis trapped and retreating to the back of the room. If he used the G21, forensic scientists would trace the weapon to the Binomial security guard. Regis would be arrested.

“Why are you attacking me?” he asked, retreating. “I’ve nothing against you, Baba Bhoopendra.”

“You insulted me.”

“How?”

“You said you were my new master. That’s an insult. I only have one earthly master. He is at the Keenaram Sthal Hermitage in Ravindrapuri in India. I must kill you or I’m not worthy of the shroud of a corpse I’m wearing.”

Regis tripped backwards on a stack of US dollars. The Indian came to stand over him. Regis decided to use the G21 or he would be killed. The mystic raised the scythe and the machete and stooped, but a bodyguard burst into the room, followed by another, their weapons drawn, the first one firing. Regis aborted drawing the G21.

Bullets tore into Baba Bhoopendra’s ribcage, neck and head. Wincing and jerking, he fell across his intended victim, the scythe and the machete clanking on the floor. The Indian smelled of putrefying flesh, incense and rum. His blood was dark and cold.

Three police officers rushed into the room. The bodyguards and the policemen took very long to attend to Regis rapidly weakening from loss of blood. He wanted them to remove the Indian’s body from him and cover him with a blanket to stop him from sliding into traumatic shock. But Heidi Gaynor on the altar, the wooden idol, Moagi Makgunda’s remains in the open freezer, the altar-corpse on the floor, the stacks of euro, US dollars, British pounds and rand, and a portrait of Gregory Yefimovich Rasputin on a wall, bewildered them senseless.

Epilogue

“Will you marry me?”

She set her knife and fork on the table, looked down at the kneeling man, and then at the few diners near their table whose attention they had attracted. A while ago, he had said he wanted to visit the bathroom, and stood up. But he had knelt beside her and was still kneeling.

Gradually scores of people noticed the proposal. The entire restaurant fell silent, expectant, and nervous on behalf of the man on his knee. The venue was the *al fresco* sixth-floor gourmet restaurant in the Port Palace Hotel along the French Riviera in Monaco’s flagship city of Monte-Carlo. The restaurant, *The Mandarine*, offered prime panoramic views over Monaco’s Grand Prix circuit and the marina.

Gaping, she stood up as if she wanted to flee, but girlishly covered her face and began to cry softly. As if it were a re-enactment of what happened in the past, when it was the two of them in a room, the man drew a handkerchief, but this time it didn’t come from a hip pocket. He drew a decorous golden serviette gracing the breast pocket of his velvet tuxedo and complimenting a bowtie of the same colour.

As she wiped her tears, he looked up at her, anxious.

She was both anxious and frightened. The last time she cried in his presence they weren’t in a public place packed with moguls, Grand Prix champions, André Giovanni Puccini alias Mr Scott Randall and possibly film stars, princes and princesses.

“It’s been three years now.” Her voice was mournful. The words crackled out of her. “You stood by me when I was devastated. You helped me come out of the doldrums. The girls call you *father* behind your back. They love you, but—”

“But *what*, sweetheart?” the man asked, panicking, clasping his hands as if in prayer.

“You took far too long to propose. I became anxious.”

The man shut his eyes self-piteously.

“Yes,” she cried. “Yes... yes... yes!” Her voice boomed as if she were an opera Flamenco on stage. “Yes, a thousand times!”

She helped him to his feet. They embraced. He slid an opal-stone ring around her left middle finger and held her hand in his. The stone sparkled. The people in the restaurant clapped their hands and stood up. Ryuu Masayoshi and Katherine kissed with maudlin tenderness. Both began to sob. Nobody understood why. The people continued to clap their hands and watch them.

A young, tall, French female singer perched on a stool on a mini-stage in a corner saw the cue and struck a romantic tune on a harmonica. She sang in French, her voice beautifully tremulous. Ryuu and Katherine waltzed. André Giovanni Puccini came to join them on the floor, a gorgeous Belarusian young woman in tow. The Belarusian held a banquet of roses. She presented them to Katherine, and linked hands with the Sicilian. The couples danced side by side.

Katherine and Ryuu talked about how Eula, Eunice and Eurydice coped with counselling in London and how the girls had quickly fitted in the British society. Of further investing in immovable properties across Europe as she had done when she bought the Port Palace Hotel, and investing her inheritance in aggressive German companies like Siemens, DaimlerChrysler and Volkswagen, they talked. He said Bushido would secure all the acquisitions as it had the Port Palace Hotel.

Ryuu suggested that they married in a quiet ceremony in her seventeenth century castle in Windsor. Katherine proposed that they married in The Bahamas.

Two luxurious yachts cruised linear in the azure waters of the Gulf of Mexico. No land or any other vessels were in sight. The sides of the trailing one were marked:

M/v New Orleans Tigress

'Just married' placards hung on the sides of the yacht.

The leading yacht's name was marked on its sides in Cyrillic and English letters:

Григорий Ефимович Распутин

M/v Gregory Yefimovich Rasputin

Regis, in a swimming trunk and dark shades, rested in a deck chair. Agnes Lamola gracefully emerged from the cabin below the deck. She was in a skimpy red bikini and nursing a cocktail. Her skin was glossy and velvet.

"Something doesn't add up, Reggie." She sat in a chair beside him.

"What isn't, darling?"

"This is the nuclear-powered yacht Uncle Moagi talked about," she said matter-of-factly.

"Correct."

"You and your young brother inherited a large chunk of his estate."

"Yes, that's why Katlego is on the other yacht with Heidi."

"I'm not talking about the newlyweds. I'm talking about you."

"What do you think about the new couple? Is it a problem that Heidi is two years older than my young brother?"

"It's only a problem in backward societies," she waved him not to interrupt.

"What isn't adding up?"

"When you gave me money to fly to Switzerland for surgery, your uncle was still alive. I mean, you hadn't inherited any penny from his estate."

"Correct, Agee."

"Where did you get all those pounds?"

"Do you know why we've dual citizenship?"

"I don't even know why we bought houses in Miami and Guadalajara, and paid large amounts for residential permits in the US and in Mexico."

"My friend and I robbed a bank, Agnes."

She clutched her chest with her free hand.

“It was as bloodless as a Tibetan wedding.”

“You robbed a bank, Regis?”

“Heidi stumbled on me burying the money in the woods at Randlord. I lied that I was a Mozambican burying a friend of mine.”

“Did you’ve to rob a bank?”

“I was tired of poverty. But had I known that I’d soon inherit a part of my uncle’s estate, I wouldn’t have robbed the bank. Bank robbery is risky business.”

“Why did you hide the money on Randlord property?”

“That was the only secure place I knew. I scaled the fence and sneaked in with a bag of money. Much of the money still lies buried in the woods. I only changed the location for the sake of Heidi.” He yawned.

“What’s going to happen to the money?”

“Maybe we won’t need it. We’ve everything anyone may ever want.”

“What use is the dual citizenship?”

“Mexico is a sanctuary. Florida is a melting pot. Cameras in the bank might’ve captured us before we covered our faces. I was afraid someone would eventually recognise us on videos.”

“You did it to cover your back?”

He nodded.

“How many were you in the robbery?”

“Me and a friend...two suffering souls.”

“Where’s this friend of yours?”

“He’s a property developer in Namibia and Angola. But he knows nothing about property development. British and Finnish graduates are working for him while he’s supplementing GCE ‘O’ level subjects. He wants to be a medical doctor.”

“You trust me this much, Regis? I could turn you in.”

“I used to think our love was an aroma which drifted away when disaster and Noah came between us.”

“When did you start thinking otherwise?”

“I saw it when I threatened to take my life in your shack. I also realised that I still loved you, but I was hiding behind the guise of

trying to discover what happened to you. Were you going to attack me with the machete?"

"Yes," she laughed. "I wanted to kill you and then take my life. I thought in death we'd become lovers again."

"How many children do you want?"

Before she answered him, the *New Orleans Tigress* yacht cruised abreast of them and blew its trumpets. The vessels were about twenty metres apart. Katlego and Heidi Makgunda, also in swimwear, were standing on the deck and kissing. Regis and Agnes jumped on their feet, shouted, whistled and waved jovially at them. The newlyweds waved back, their mouths clasped.

Seduced at the age of fourteen by her foster father-cum-priest, Heidi Gaynor roamed the Docklands of London and wound up at a château in France. Now she is almost seventeen and ready for a decent livelihood, but isn't aware an opportunity can reduce her to a vulgar necessity. When her new master's wife, Katherine, is troubled if she really saw her billionaire husband in bed with their daughter, the rich man erupts. In her investigations, Katherine undergoes a "post mortem". The billionaire must cover his back before secrets traceable to Gregory Rasputin consume his family. Regis is the billionaire's vagrant nephew, a disillusioned graduate on a quest to unknot a crime that crippled his student-nurse fiancée. He thinks he must rob a bank and play a role prophesied when he was in his boyhood. *Glittering Gallows* is mainly set in France, South Africa and Australia.

BASIL DIKI is traditionally a polemic dramatist and a stage director. He is the author of *Shrouded Blessings*, *The Lord of Anomy*, and *Two Hangmen, One Scaffold Book I & II* all published by Langa. He also wrote "The Tribe of Graves", published elsewhere, all plays. *Glittering Gallows*, is his second novel. Kadoma is Basil Diki's hometown, but the writer now lives in Harare with his three children and entrepreneurial wife, Joleen. Despite being a boundless writer, demonology and comparative religious studies remain his pastime.



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